

Judge Not
Matthew 7:1-12
March 19, 2023
David Lewicki, preaching

We are nearing the end of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. We have heard his Blessings, his teaching about the Law, his direction to a deeply inward spirituality, and his warnings about wealth. As Jesus moves toward the conclusion of this sermon, he still has a few pearls to share. They are some of his most important teachings about how we human beings are to relate to one other.

⁷ "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ² For the judgment you give will be the judgment you get, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³ Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴ 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? ⁵ You 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.

⁶ "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.

⁷ "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ⁹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for bread, would give a stone? ¹⁰ Or if the child asked for a fish, would give a snake? ¹¹ If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will [God] give good things to those who ask!

¹² "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for *this* is the Law and the Prophets.

The section culminates in what we know as The Golden Rule. *Do to others as you would have them do to you.* It's not unique to Christianity, Jesus didn't invent it. The idea that human beings should treat others as we would be treated is ancient; it transcends religions and cultures. It is the ground of ethics. All human beings deserve to be treated well—one thing is intolerable: that some deserve to be treated better than others.

Careful thinkers note that "do unto others" doesn't actually *require* you to treat someone well. A libertarian might say "you ignore me and I'll happily ignore you, too." The Golden Rule becomes a high ethical bar for Christians because it comes at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has declared that we are blessed when you make peace and offer mercy; he has told you to refrain from anger, turn the other cheek when struck, and love your enemies. The message of the whole Sermon is that you are called to be holy and this calling leads you to a high plane of respectful, compassionate, merciful interactions with others.

Nowhere does Jesus' expectation for a higher plane of interpersonal ethics become more pointed than here at beginning of chapter 7, when Jesus says, "do not judge, so that you will not be judged." Don't mess with the teeny tiny little fleck of dust in your neighbor's eye until you pay attention to big, honkin' beam of wood hanging out of your own eye. Your eye is the site of your moral vision—the place from which you see right and wrong. You *may* see something that's getting in the way of your neighbor doing the right thing—but friend, until you discover that you can't see a thing because of your own ocular obstruction, you have no business being your neighbor's optometrist.

Let's look carefully at what this teaching means.

Let's begin with the mental act that Jesus says is off-limits to us. It's translated in English as "judgment." "Judge not." But as several of you in Bible study noted this week, our capacity for judgment itself isn't a bad thing. Jesus (in Matthew) makes judgments about lots of things—right way to pray, how to handle money, controlling your anger. So what he's advocating here is not the absence of all judgment—it's not a plug for moral relativity, each of us figuring out what's good for ourselves. Exercising moral judgement is part of a good life.

So, what can't we do? New Testament scholar Warren Carter says the better translation is "condemnation." Don't condemn others. Don't render your verdict about their worth; don't sentence someone else; don't assume a place of moral superiority over someone else. Don't condemn another *before* you've done all of your own inner work.

There's something deeply modern about Jesus' instruction to examine the log in our own eye. Psychology has revealed, in countless ways, how we center our own morality, we normalize our moral perspective. We minimize our own faults and flaws and we justify and excuse them. But for others we offer our choicest judgments: we criticize, we "demonize," and we "otherize" people when their actions and attitudes and faith and appearance are different than ours. How many of you recognize this in yourself? Can you think of a time when you've done this?

Why? Why do we let condemnation intercede in our relationships? Why do we human beings look at someone else, see the difference, and judge them less than ourselves?

It has to do with us being social. What we want most of all—what all of us need—is to be accepted. We want to be part of a group. To be "in." Most groups define what is "in" by also clarifying what is "out." You're "in" if you go to Lakeside—you're "out" if you go to Decatur. You're in if you voted for this guy; you're out if you voted for that woman. You're in if your skin is this color; you're out if your skin is that color. We are tribal beings. Judgment is the means by which we define the boundaries of our tribes and know that we belong.

In the two millennia since Jesus, we haven't transcended tribalism. Republicans and Democrats. Rich and poor. Native and foreign-born. Our tribes are as strong as ever, re-enforced everyday by the demonic presence of social media, which pushes us to search for "likes" from our own tribe and amplifies our outrage at the conduct of "those people."

Jesus needs us to stop. To cut it out. All of it. Stop our reflexive tribalism by cutting off tribalism at its root—that root is the instinct to condemn.

Your condemnation is your inner insecurity—your hunger to be loved and accepted—leaping out from inside you and manifesting itself as an effort to control others. Condemnation is the opposite of love. Love is "granting another the grace of their own autonomy." Love is what allows for the beautiful process of mutual discovery, free of the exercise of control.

All of us experience a need to condemn. It's deep in us. What can we do about it? How do we fix something that feels so deep in our nature?

There's no easy way out. The only way that I know is to do my own work and for you to do yours. Some of the greatest Lenten fasts I've ever seen are by those who have tried to fast from judgment. Could you make it your practice to notice every time you are tempted to condemn someone? Write it down in a journal. Every time you see yourself looking at someone and thinking—"that's not right—that's not good—that person's worse than I am..." you need to stop. In that moment ask yourself "why do I feel this need to condemn that person? Can I let them be different without that difference causing me to judge?" Ask yourself, "why is their difference threatening to me?" You can't (yet) know their motivations, so look at your own motivations. "What about me makes me so invested in my perspective?" 99 times out of 100 you will learn something about yourself. About how you were raised. What you saw around you growing up. A way of doing things or thinking about the world that helped you find acceptance. When you do this inner work, you will discover all kinds of motivations you have for your values: the family systems, the deep fears, the emotional needs.

When you look at what's in your own eye, you will find that when you name it and begin the process of removing it (although I'm not sure we ever fully get the log out of our eye—and that may be the punchline of this teaching), you will begin to see others differently. You will hold your own perspective more gracefully. You will see how you came to be you is wrapped up in all the mysterious particularities of your life. You will see that changing yourself—your attitudes and behaviors—is hard, but possible. In all of this inner work, you will begin to find others less threatening.

When another person's difference is no longer a threat to you, you can replace your condemnation with curiosity. Curiosity is always the posture a Christian takes with others. What makes you the way you are? How did you get to feel that way, or think that way, or choose that path? You grant them their autonomy. Because that is the only path that leads to love.

Jesus is not saying here that we can never form moral judgments. We must. There are times when we must say to someone "I wonder if you should be doing that." "I don't believe that is good for you or for others." But we make those judgements from a place of deep introspection, from having done our inner work, and then we engage others out the same spirit of curiosity and compassion that we brought to ourselves. Besides, if you want that person to change, you know that your condemnation is unlikely to work. What works? Modeling introspection. Building trust, lowering judgment. Walking alongside someone until they are ready to change.

We live in a world full of different. Of conflict and tribalism, fear of outsiders, and intolerance of difference. Jesus lived in the same world. And Jesus asked his followers to be self-aware and humble; and to bring to every relationship curiosity and compassion instead of condemnation. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. That is the way of love.