June 26, 2016

“The Danger of Being Judgmental”

Matthew 7:1-11

**FCF**: Our struggle with being judgmental

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) Jesus calls us to be morally discerning.

(magnet) But we must also be mercifully patient with one another.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

Of all the verses in the Bible, what would you say is the most well-known? I haven’t done any exhaustive research on this but I have a good idea of the answer. (READ Matthew 7:1) Not that many could cite the reference, the context, or the speaker. But most can surely quote it.

We see this on Facebook, in the family room, the kitchen, and the classroom. “*Who are you to judge?*” The problem is that this has left us without any ability to speak with any moral clarity. Things are fine when we agree. But as soon as we disagree, we get this response. And that’s hardly surprising. We naturally get defensive. The wounds, even from a friend, hurt. But it goes beyond that. We’re constantly told and daily assaulted with the idea that there are no standards, no objective or transcendent truth. Which makes it impossible to speak or weigh in.

Into all this confusion, we desperately need a voice of sanity. And Jesus speaks to this.

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Matthew 7:1-11

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Summer brings me memories of firehoses – the firemen in their gear, the hose snaking back to the fire engine, and the jet of water through the air. Summertime brings out firehoses, not just to put out flames but to entertain children at picnics. No doubt many of you can relate. That’s what a firehose is for. That’s the sort of good it can bring when it’s used in the right way.

That said, that’s not the only way a firehose can be used. Think of the 1963 Birmingham Campaign during the Civil Rights Movement. To protest segregation laws in the city, there were a series of lunch counter sit-ins, marches on City Hall, and boycotts on downtown merchants. In response to these peaceful demonstrations, those efforts were met by police dogs, batons, and high pressure firehoses turned on men, women, and children. The images are chilling still today. Certainly, that is a way a firehose can be used. But it is not a way that it should be used.

We are called to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We are to exercise discernment following God’s commands pertaining to ourselves and others. But we are to do so in the right way. And, especially in relationship with others, we are to have a humility of spirit.

Which brings us to our text. The Sermon on the Mount is not a series of isolated sayings. It flows. Jesus says we are to be different, distinct from the hypocrisy of the religious and the materialism of the irreligious. We are to live as His followers. There is an intensity to this. And that intensity can lead to a judgmental spirit. We start to assess how others are doing. Or not.

Here’s the thing we need to see. Jesus calls us to be morally discerning. That is absolutely true. But we must also be mercifully patient with one another. That comes out here in three ways. First, with a command. Second, with a warning. And third, with a promise.

1. **THE COMMAND**

So, first, the command. We see this in vv.1-5, broken up into two parts.

1. *A Prohibition*
2. What Jesus says

The first part of the command is a prohibition (READ Matthew 7:1). What is Jesus saying here? Let’s be clear on this. He is not prohibiting moral assessments or discernment. He is not calling for us to suspend evaluations or stop using our critical faculties. That would be to make nonsense of His teaching. And it would grossly violate the image and likeness of God we bear.

What Jesus is calling out is a hyper-critical attitude. He is condemning our condemning spirit, our endless fault-finding and assuming the worst of one another. That is what He is prohibiting.

1. Why Jesus says it

Why? (READ Matthew 7:2) To take our place in the judgment seat is to usurp Jesus’ authority. It is to assume knowledge of other people and situations we simply do not have. It is to admit that we know and have accepted the standards for judgment. And to open ourselves to it.

So part of the reason for the prohibition is the reality of coming judgment. And then the insanity of our own (READ Matthew 7:3-4). This is an image from the carpenter’s shop. And it’s meant to be absurd. One party insisting on helping another. Yet all can see he is incapable of doing so.

1. *An Admonition*

Which takes us to the second half of the command, the admonition (READ Matthew 7:5).

1. Address yourself

We must begin with addressing ourselves. We are not ready to do such delicate surgery until we do. And no one will rightly let us. So we have to start with examining our hearts, interrogating our thoughts, words, and deeds – asking, “*How have I contributed to this and made it worse?*”

1. Assist others

But we don’t stop there. Guidance and correction may still be needed. The call to get the log out of our own eye does not then rule out our assisting others with the speck in theirs. Jesus is giving us incremental steps here. First, get the log out. Then, go and help your brother.

This is something we need to hear. We are far too quick to say, “*Who am I to say anything?*” Who are you not to say anything? As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in Life Together (READ quote):

*Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to his sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a brother back from the path of sin.*

So that’s the command and its two parts – the prohibition and the admonition.

*Application:*

In terms of application, this is pretty obvious. But hardly easy. For we have a tendency to think much of others’ sins and little of our own. We need to press against that, to reverse it. We need to ask for the Lord’s help in thinking less of others’ sins and much more of our own.

Jesus calls us to be morally discerning. Which demands hearing this command.

1. **THE WARNING**

Moving then from the command, Jesus gives us a warning (READ Matthew 7:6). We are clearly called to not be judgmental. But that does not mean that we are to be simpletons.

1. *Stark Images*

Jesus is striking a balance here. And He uses some stark images to make His point.

1. The animals

Dogs in that time were not family pets but scavengers. Pigs were ceremonially unclean. These were animals that were known to be vicious and filthy, despised especially by Jewish people.

1. The actions

One wouldn’t think of giving consecrated food to a dog. Or valuable pearls to a pig.

1. *Startling Implications*

So, pulling this together, we move from these stark images to some startling implications.

1. There is a time to stop

That is, there is a time to stop. Not that Jesus is saying we shouldn’t share the news of His kingdom and His work. But that there can come a time when we are to stop sharing that news.

1. We have a treasure to keep

Why? There is a time to stop because we have a treasure to keep. To persist beyond a point with some people is to not only invite contempt on the messenger but blasphemy toward the message.

These are Jesus’ words – not just the initial command but the warning as well. But let me add this. Backing off of proclaiming the message to someone is a serious thing. It is always an exceptional situation, one which we may never encounter. It’s worth noting that John Stott said he could remember only two such people in all his years of traveling the globe as an evangelist.

*Application:*

Jesus is striking a balance, helping us to see that the gospel is something to be treasured and not trampled upon. Much as in Proverbs (READ Proverbs 9:8; 23:9). If someone proves to be like a dog or a pig toward the gospel, we cheapen this treasure by continually offering it.

*Illustration:*

Think of it this way. Think of something you hold in honor, of something you refuse to let anyone trample upon. There are regulations, for instance, on the care of the American flag. It is never to be used as a drapery or decoration. When it is disposed, it is to be done with dignity, preferably by burning. All because we deem it to be worth treating in an honorable fashion.

We are to be morally discerning. Which demands hearing the command and warning.

1. **THE PROMISE**

But who is equal to such a task? Discerning the balance between vv.1-5 and v.6 is difficult. It’s a tightrope. So Jesus follows with a promise. Now, these next few verses are so far reaching that I want to return to them next week. But it’s worth saying something here.

1. *The Imperatives*

Reading on, we see Jesus begins with some imperatives (READ Matthew 7:7).

1. The theological lesson

Note the increasing intensity. Ask! Seek! Knock! Go! Go to your Father in prayer.

1. The grammatical lesson

It’s something of a theological lesson. But there is a grammatical lesson here too. These are not just wise suggestions from a manager. These are royal edicts, commands from our king.

1. *The Assurance*

And coupled with the imperatives we have this assurance (READ Matthew 7:8-11).

1. He is better than the best

This is another of the “lesser to greater” arguments of the Sermon on the Mount. Our Father in heaven is better than the best of our earthly fathers. The best of our earthly fathers have the innate impulse to provide all they can. But they are still flawed. Not so our heavenly Father.

1. He will surely hear us

He will surely hear us. And He will give us good things. Meaning what? Meaning, in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, wisdom and discernment in the balance between this command and this warning. Meaning the desire and ability to walk in the Lord’s ways.

Again, there’s more I want to say on this next week. But this is the promise we have.

*Application:*

This is good news. And a great relief. Jesus does call us and send us forth. But He never calls us to do what He does not also equip us to do. He sends us forth but is with us every step of the way through the indwelling of His Spirit. And that, my friends, is fuel for prayer. For we can ask. We can seek. We can knock. We can do all of those things and know that He hears us.

Jesus calls us to be morally discerning. Which demands hearing this promise.

**CONCLUSION:**

Some of you may have heard that Jerry Bridges died recently. Jerry Bridges was a prolific author with a keen insight and ability to teach the Bible. One of his lesser known books is The Crisis of Caring. It’s about what the Bible has to say about genuine community. In relation to this text, I want to make the case we are also suffering from a crisis of criticism. Even if we recognize the emptiness of saying “*Who are you to judge?*” we are no better. We are incapable of receiving it. We are so insecure that we feel threatened and come undone by even a hint of criticism. So we lash out at other people. We are incapable of receiving it. And we are incapable of giving it. In our minds, we elevate ourselves and denigrate one another. And so, to the little people around us, we speak with harsh words and shrill tones. Yet all the while there are still the hard things that we do need to hear. And to say. We have a crisis in criticism.

Here’s a case study, the 2016 Easter Meltdown. It wasn’t a case of broken eggs but a fragile ego. Sarah and I were hosting several folks in our home that Sunday afternoon. We were bustling about in the kitchen, just prior to the dinner. She made an incidental remark which I took very poorly. And I snapped at her. To her credit, she immediately called me on it, cutting through the fog of my foolishness and piercing my heart in a way that I needed. And we were then able to keep moving. What was the problem? Basically, it came down to this. In that moment, I had forgotten the most essential things. Not only her love for me but my security in Jesus’ finished work and my identity as a beloved child of my Heavenly Father. I had forgotten the very things that should serve as the foundation, the ballast for my storm tossed boat.

I tell you that story just to stress this point. What is the solution to the crisis of criticism? Jesus is. Jesus is. Our teacher here in the Sermon on the Mount is our Savior in and through all of life. At the cross, we see the worst criticism of our sin we can imagine. And the greatest assurance of His love. That’s the answer to the crisis. That’s the context of this command, this warning, and this promise. May we hear His words, rest in His work, and walk in His ways.

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