

DO NOT JUDGE

MATTHEW 7:1

Pastor Andrew B. Pigott

Chinese Christian Church of New Jersey

Sunday, June 15, 2003

TODAY, BEFORE EVE IS BAPTIZED, I WOULD LIKE TO consider the meaning of the command recorded in Matthew 7:1 that tells us not to judge other people.

I feel there is a great need to understand the meaning of this command at this point of time in the history of our church. We have been attempting to create structures that can serve as bridges between our church and the community. We have made some effort at letting our community know that people of all races and backgrounds are welcome to attend our services. We have seen an increase in diversity among those who are attending our services. The Holy Spirit has been working in the lives of people who have come into our church, and we have seen people make decisions to receive salvation from their sins and begin the process of learning how to daily walk with God. I believe what we have witnessed is a cause for rejoicing. We must not overlook what the work of God's grace has done in the lives of so many people through the ministry of this church.

But, all that has been happening in recent years has also caused many people to become concerned. I have heard some people say that we need to do more to protect the church from the worldly influences of our community. People in our church are talking about how other people who are attending our church live and behave and questions are being raised. People in the church are wondering what to think when they see other people who attend our church violating what they believe to be biblical standards of behavior. A great deal of time is now being spent in committee meetings in an attempt to come up with rules that will protect our church and keep it holy.

All these developments make it absolutely necessary for us to understand what Jesus meant when He said, "Do not judge." Today, I will begin a series of sermons that I hope will help us the principles we should use as we engage ourselves in the activity of judging other people.

THE FIRST THING I WANT TO EMPHASIZE IS WHAT THE words of our Lord recorded in MATTHEW 7:1 do not mean. And, the one thing that must be said is that we should never take this statement literally to mean we must never practice judgment or express our judgment about anything. To interpret Christ's words in that way would be to create a terrible contradiction with many other passages in the Bible. For instance, look a few verses down at MATTHEW 7:6 and you will find these words, "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces."

How can we put that into practice if we do not exercise judgment? And again, in verse 15, we find the words, "Watch out for false prophets" How can we even know whether or not someone is a false prophet if we never think what is false and what is true or if we are afraid of taking a stand when we see something happening that is not right? In MATTHEW 7:16, Jesus is recorded as saying that we will be able to recognize the false prophets by their fruit. That means that we must engage in assessment of what is being taught, and we must examine the words and behavior of others to discern the difference between true and false.

God commands people to exercise judgment. According to ROMANS 13, even authorities outside of the church are appointed by God to execute judgment on other people. God appoints Judges and magistrates, and their duty is to pronounce judgment so that sin and evil will be restrained in society.

And, in the church, God appoints leaders assigns them the duty of assessing what is happening in the church so they can make judgment calls and carry out discipline if necessary. They are to do this in order to restrain the influence of evil in the church. The Elder Board of our church is doing the right thing when it engages in the activity of assessing and discerning and even judging.

When the apostle Paul wrote letters to church leaders, he often expressed judgment. In 1 CORINTHIANS 15, he condemned people in the church who taught that there is no resurrection from the dead. In 2 TIMOTHY 2:17, he even mentions the names of two people, Hymenaeus and Philetus, whom he has judged as heretics. In TITUS 3:10, Paul instructs a church leader named Titus. Listen to what he says. "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him." That takes us beyond judgment to discipline.

In the Bible, we find that it is the norm for a church to routinely engage in judgment and discipline. In MATTHEW 18, Jesus teaches us what we should do when a brother sins against us. He tells us that we must go to the person in question and tell him his fault. If the person does not listen and refuses to confess and repent, then we are to try again. But this time, we are to take one or two other people along with us. If he still refuses to listen, then we are to tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, then he must be treated as a pagan. And, the same kind of teaching is found in 1 CORINTHIANS 5 and 6. For people in the church who are openly living in sin and who refuse to confess their sins and repent, the instruction

is explicit and clear. 1 CORINTHIANS 5:13 says, "Expel the wicked man from among you."

These are just a few examples of a large number of passages from the Bible that prove our Lord's statement in MATTHEW 7:1 does not mean that we must never judge. We must arrive at conclusions and we must make practical applications to the conclusions.

So what does Jesus mean when He said, "Do not judge?" The answer I am going to give you may sound simple enough, but it requires some explanation. **The simple answer is that Jesus is referring here to a kind of judgment that condemns another person.** That is the simple answer. But, the simple answer by itself will not do, because it is very difficult for most people to tell the difference between everything I have just said we should do in the way of judging others and the thing I am now saying we must avoid doing.

When it comes to the matter of judging or not judging other people, the Christian life is like walking on a very narrow balance beam, so narrow it is like walking on the edge of a knife. We must keep on the beam without falling to one side or the other. The area on the one side of the balance beam represents those who refuse to judge at all. They refuse to think and to discern and to act on what they have found. The area on the other side of the balance beam represents those who judge in a condemning way.

We have just examined the one side of the balance beam, and I hope that some of you are convinced that it is bad to fall over to that side. We are now going to attempt to understand the other side of the balance beam by trying to understand what it means to judge another person in a condemning way. Judgment that condemns manifests itself in certain ways. Let's consider some of the manifestations of this kind of judgment that we must avoid.

One manifestation of this bad kind of judgment is its tendency to feel superior. It is the tendency to think that I am less of a sinner or less guilty than the person I am judging. It is the self-righteous spirit of the Pharisee I am talking about. There is sin all around me, and it must be confronted; however, I must never think I am less sinful or less guilty than the person I am confronting. A person who stays on the balance beam is constantly aware that he also struggles with sin and is also in need of people to confront him and help him. A person who falls off into the area of judgment that condemns forgets his own sinful nature and begins to look down with contempt on others who do sin.

Another manifestation of this kind of judgment is to become hypercritical. True criticism is constructive. It tries to build a person up and help him improve. The purpose of church discipline is never to punish. It is always to help win a person back to God. The instructions about church discipline found in MATTHEW 18 come right after the parable of the lost sheep. That story helps us understand God's heart to find and

restore people back to fellowship. According to MATTHEW 18:15, the reason why we are to confront people who are sinning is to win them back. It is constructive confrontation that does not take pleasure in pointing out fault in other people. A person who engages in this kind of confrontation should do it out of a sense of duty and not a sense of pleasure.

Now hyper-criticism is entirely different. A person who is hypercritical actually takes joy in finding fault. He approaches people expecting to find fault and almost hoping to find fault. 1 CORINTHIANS 13 tells us that love "hopeth all things." Love always hopes for the best, but the hypercritical spirit always hopes for the worst and is never really happy unless it finds faults in other people. And, of course, it tends to make things that really don't matter into things of vital importance.

Whenever we feel even a little bit pleased when we hear that another person has made a mistake, then we are in danger of having this bad spirit of judgment overtake us. We must take heed of the warning signs. If a person with whom we feel a bit jealous or envious makes a mistake and we find there is an immediate sense of pleasure within us, then we must begin to make special effort to change our attitude. These little feelings of pleasure are what lead us to this awful spirit of judgment that Jesus tells us to avoid in MATTHEW 7:1.

Another manifestation of this bad kind of judgment that condemns is that it fails to make a distinction between repentance and restitution. When people sin (and we all do), there is created a need for three things to happen. The first thing is confession. This is admitting to the fact that we have sinned. The second thing is repentance. Repentance is making your mind up to change and never to sin again. Repentance is a changed mind. The third thing is restitution. This is doing everything in one's power to restore things to the way they were before the sin was committed. When people sin we need to help them do all three of these things.

Church discipline is meant for people who have not done the first two of these things. As we noted in MATTHEW 18 and 1 CORINTHIANS 5, certain action must be taken if a person who has sinned refuses to listen and does not confess and does not repent. We call that action church discipline. It basically involves excommunication or taking measures to avoid the person who refuses to confess and repent.

In practical terms this can mean excluding a person from the membership list of the church. It can also mean not welcoming the person to participate in fellowship. You could ask the person not to attend certain activities. And, in churches where the priest or pastor serves communion to people in plain sight for everyone to see, excommunication can mean refusing to serve that person communion. A priest once excommunicated me by telling me that he would no longer serve me communion, because he felt I was

unwilling to confess and repent of an action that he felt was morally wrong. Churches use these methods to discipline people who refuse to confess and repent of their sins.

But, when a person who sins does confess and does repent, it is absolutely wrong to use one of the methods I have just described to excommunicate that person. Now that should seem obvious. But, it is not obvious to some people because they confuse to make a distinction between repentance and restitution. I myself have failed to make this distinction in the past, but present circumstance I find myself in are now forcing me to think hard about the difference.

Repentance is something that happens the moment a person changes his mind about his sin. But, restoration is something that happens over a period of time. In fact, trying to restore things to the way they were before the sin was committed can sometimes take a lifetime. And sometimes, especially with sins like adultery and divorce things can never be completely restored to the way they used to be.

Now a failure to make a distinction between repentance and restitution results in church leaders excommunicating people who have confessed and repented and are in desperate need of fellowship to help them in the process of restoration. When we excommunicate people until they have completed the restoration process or have reached some point in the restoration process, then we are guilty of judging them in a way that God does not want us to judge them.

This past week I heard the story of a woman who had committed adultery but who had also confessed her sin and made up her mind never to do it again. The pastor of the church realized that the woman had confessed and repented, but he still forced her to keep silent in the congregation for a period of one year. She was literally forbidden to talk to anyone in the congregation. The person who told me the story said it was so strange, because the poor woman needed to talk so badly and people wanted to talk to her, but everyone was afraid to break the rule, so they continued to apply the rules of excommunication who desperately needed fellowship. This illustration is not an example of constructive judgment, because it does not help an individual come back to God.

Another way this bad kind of judgment manifests itself is that it often expresses opinion without knowledge of the facts. It does not go to the trouble to really

understand the circumstances before pronouncing judgment. The man who exercises the good kind of judgment looks beyond the surface of things and takes the time to listen to the explanations and even to the excuses that are made. He does so in an attempt to discover if there may be any circumstances that may justify the action that appears on the surface to be sin. In John 7:24 Jesus said, "Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment."

The last manifestation of the kind of judgment that condemns is the tendency to determine who is going to hell or who should go to hell. It is the tendency to pronounce final judgment on people. It goes beyond judging what people do to judging the persons themselves. A good illustration of this is LUKE 9:54-55. Jesus had sent messengers into Samaritan villages to get people ready for His arrival. The messengers were not well received. When James and John heard this they said to Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" They wanted the Samaritans destroyed. That is the spirit of judgment that Jesus was talking about when He said, "Do not judge." Jesus rebuked James and John saying, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."

A person who judges that other people are going to hell or should go to hell, often begins by judging the motives of other people. People who get into the habit of judging other people's motives will easily transgress into a state where they are pronouncing final judgment.

Only God has the authority to judge who is going to heaven and who is going to hell. And, only God has the authority to judge the motives of men. We can question, and sometimes we should question. But only God has the final say.

Every one of us must walk the balance beam of judgment every day of our lives. It is very easy to fall off to one side or the other, to do nothing or to judge in a condemning way. I have fallen off many times, but I must get back up and do my best not to fall off again. We all must.

I will leave the application of this message to you. Please consider what has been said in the privacy of your own heart. And may the Holy Spirit help you to know what to do.