

DO NOT JUDGE: THE REASONS FOR THE COMMAND

MATTHEW 7:1-5

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Last Sunday I made an attempt to explain what Jesus meant when He commanded us not to judge other people. Today I would like to take a look at the reasons behind the command.

But, before I make the transition from the command itself to the reasons behind the command, I feel the need to spend a moment reviewing. I received constructive feedback from last week's sermon from more than one person. Sometimes what we say and what others hear us say are not one in the same, and that may have been the case last Sunday.

The main point I tried to get across that Sunday was the need for a balanced approach to judging other people. On the one hand, we must observe and even assess the speech and behavior of other people. We must come to conclusions and we must act upon our conclusions. On the other hand, we must avoid judging people in a condemning way.

Last week I said that church leaders do have a responsibility to make judgment calls when it comes to the moral conduct of people in the congregation. They even have the responsibility to excommunicate people whom they have determined are unwilling to confess their sins and who have not made up their minds to stop sinning. I mentioned that a priest once refused to give me communion because he believed that I was unwilling to repent of what he believed to be a sin in my life. My intention of using that illustration was not to criticize the priest. To this day I do not believe that I was committing a sin at the time; however, the priest did believe I was sinning, and he had every right to use the method he used to excommunicate me. In fact, he was obliged to do so, and I think the man should be given credit for standing behind his convictions.

But, let us say that I went to the priest and admitted to him that what I was doing was wrong and that I had made up my mind to change my ways. I am almost certain that the priest would not have excommunicated me. He may have told me to go into the sanctuary and say fifty 'Hail Mary's' and ten 'Our Father's' as an expression of sorrow (penance) for what I had done. But, he would not have excommunicated me.

But, suppose I did confess that I had done wrong and that I wanted to change and he still excommunicated me. Suppose that he told me that I had committed the unpardonable sin and that I would go to hell no matter what I did. Or suppose that he told me I would be

excommunicated until I proved my repentance by performing some particular act over a certain period of time. If I had confessed my sin and told him that I wanted to change, and he had responded by doing either of those two things, then I believe he would have been violating the command Jesus gave us not to judge other people.

There are certain things we can do as human beings and there are certain things that only God can do. As human beings, we cannot determine who is going to heaven and who is going to hell. And, as human beings, we cannot use an objective standard to judge whether or not someone has repented. When a certain person says he is sorry and that he wants to change, we must take him at his word unless we have proof that he is lying. Sometimes people do lie, but in many cases what appears to be a lack of improvement in the situation is simply an indication of an intense struggle with sin that the person is facing.

I used to go to the confessional every Saturday night and tell the priest that I had violated the fifth commandment. And then I would tell him how many times I had violated the fifth commandment. I actually kept count. I did that for years. I am sure it must have appeared to the priest that I had not truly repented, but I was sincere and my sin caused me much grief.

There is one other point I feel I must clarify, and that is this: There is a difference between excommunicating people and restricting people from serving in the church. Excommunication is using a particular method to cut someone off from fellowship in an attempt to bring that person to their senses so they will turn back to God. We should not excommunicate people who have confessed and repented. However, we can and even should restrict people in doing certain things until they have reached a certain level of maturity and have proven their witness to be stable. It is not out of order for church leadership to tell a certain person that they must wait to teach Sunday school or lead a small group or wait to serve in some other way. Church leadership has every right to evaluate a person's lifestyle and speech and overall spiritual maturity before they allow that person to take on major responsibility.

Whether you agree or disagree with my conclusions, I hope these remarks help clear up whatever confusion last Sunday's sermon may have created. Now I must move on from looking at the command itself to looking at the reasons behind the command.

As we have been progressing through the Sermon on the Mount, you may have noticed a pattern in our Lord's teaching. Following each command we find reasons for the command. In Matthew 6 Jesus said, "Do not do your acts of righteousness before men." Then following that command we find an explanation. "If you do, you will not receive a reward from your Father in heaven." Later, Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth." Following that we find the reason. "Because, if you do, moth and rust will destroy and thieves will break in." Just recently we considered another command. Jesus commands us not to worry. In that section of scripture, Jesus went to great lengths to explain why we should not worry. And today we will find the same thing true with this command not to judge. We will find three reasons given why we should not judge.

Every time I see how Jesus went to such great lengths to explain to us why we should do the things He is commanded to do, I believe I am looking into the heart of God. He loves us so much that He will condescend to our level and use logical argument to persuade us. He doesn't have to do that, but He knows our weakness all too well.

Please look at the first reason behind the command not to judge other people. It is found in MATTHEW 7:1. "Do not judge, or you too will be judged."

Now there are two ways of interpreting this sentence, and there is probably some truth to both interpretations. The first interpretation is to say that, 'If you judge people in the wrong way, they will, in turn, judge you.' I think there is some truth to this interpretation. Last week we talked about hypercritical people who are always trying to find the fault in other people's lives. It is my observation that such people usually end up becoming the focus of judgment themselves, and that is a sobering thought to anyone engaged in judging other people.

But that happens to anyone whether they be Christian or non-Christian. Even someone who is worldly wise but has no fear of God can learn that lesson and adjust his behavior so as to avoid harsh criticism from other people.

We have to keep in mind, however, that the Sermon on the Mount was meant for Christians and not just anyone. For that reason I prefer the second interpretation which is this: 'Do not judge, or you will be judged by God.' This will mean nothing to a person who does not fear God, but to a Christian who does fear God, it should mean a lot and become a tremendous incentive to obey the command not to judge.

The biggest problem with this interpretation is the notion that Christians are exempt from God's judgment. It is argued that, from the moment Jesus saved us and gave us eternal life, the blood of Christ somehow acts as a shield around us, making it impossible to every experience God's wrath.

Now this would be true if there were only one kind of judgment and one kind of wrath. It would be true if the only judgment were the final judgment that determines whether or not a person is going to experience the wrath of God in hell for eternity. But it is not true, because there is more than one kind of judgment mentioned in the Bible.

In 1 CORINTHIANS 11, the apostle Paul tells Christians to examine themselves to see if they are treating one another properly in the Body of Christ. You see, there were divisions within the church, and those divisions were resulting in the exclusion of certain people from the communion table. The apostle Paul warned the Christians that they must examine themselves to see if they are participating in this sin, because participating in this kind of sin will bring judgment upon themselves and the Body of Christ. In 1 CORINTHIANS 11:29-30, we find these words, "For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep."

Here we are talking about a judgment for Christians that does not result in eternal damnation, but it, nevertheless, has grave consequences. God does punish Christians when they sin. ROMANS 1:18 says, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness." That verse is for Christians and non-Christians alike. For Christians the wrath or punishment for sins is not in the form of eternal damnation, but it is in the form of discipline that is intended to help us see our need to repent and to change.

In 1 CORINTHIANS 11, there is an explicit reference to sickness and death. This is not to say that God sends sickness upon us when we sin. What it probably means is that God withholds His protection from us when we sin, allowing Satan to attack us with illness. In 1 CORINTHIANS 5, there is a mention of someone in the church who is involved in sexual immorality. The instruction Paul gives in 1 CORINTHIANS 5:5 is sobering. He says, "Hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature maybe destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord."

HEBREWS 12:5-6 says, "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." The Hebrew Christians were going through difficult times, and God wanted them to have a correct view of their hardships. Whether the hardships are a result of our own sins or the sins of people around us, they are meant for a purpose. The purpose is to correct us and discipline us so that we can be prepared for glory.

The scriptures make it clear that Christians are not entirely exempt from God's judgment, and it extremely important that we realize this. Whenever we sin, we will

be judged immediately. And we will also be judged in eternity. So far I have mentioned two kinds of judgment, eternal judgment that condemns a person to hell and a present judgment that comes to God's children when they need disciplined. But there is even a third kind of judgment mentioned in the Bible. It is commonly referred to as the judgment of rewards.

ROMANS 14:10 warns us not to judge other people, because "we will all stand before God's judgment seat." After we die, we will all stand before God to give an account for what we have done. 1 CORINTHIANS 3 urges us to be careful how we 'build' our lives, because our work will be shown for what it is in the end. That Day (that is, the judgment day) will bring it to light. 2 CORINTHIANS 5:10 says, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad." 1 JOHN 2:28 says, And now, dear children, continue in Him so that when He appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming." If we want to have boldness in the day of judgment, we must be careful as to how we live in the here and now.

I must admit that there is a lot I do not understand about what Bible teachers describe to be the 'judgment of rewards'. But the fact that there is a judgment for God's people after death is very clearly taught in the Bible.

Don't judge other people; because, if you do, you will experience the judgment of God both now and in the future. This is the first reason given behind the command.

The second reason for the command not to judge is found in verse 2: "For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

Again, as with verse 1, we may conclude this to mean that people will use the same standard to judge us as we use to judge them. And, of course, we all know that to be true to some extent. But there is a deeper meaning to this warning that we will be judged by the same standard that we judge other people. The scriptures indicate that God will use the same standard to judge us that we use to judge other people. Again, looking at it like this makes the warning a lot more serious.

ROMANS 2:1-3 helps us understand this warning better. That section of scripture reads like this: "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?" When we pass judgment on other people, we are declaring that we know what is right. So if we do

not do what we know is right, we are condemning ourselves.

JAMES 3:1 also helps us understand what Jesus is saying. There we read these words: "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." Do I claim that I have exceptional knowledge of the Bible? If I do, then I will be judged according to the knowledge that I claim to have. Am I running around, being hypercritical of everything I see people doing, because I believe I know what is right and what is wrong? Then I should not be surprised when God uses the same nitpicking standard to judge me. Now that should be an incentive not to judge people in the wrong way.

The third and final reason why we should not judge people in a condemning way is found in verses 3-5 of MATTHEW 7. This is the section of scripture that emphasizes how unqualified we are to judge people in a condemning way. I have already mentioned that there are certain things that only God is qualified to do. Now this section of scripture explains why only God is qualified to judge in a way that determines the final destiny of another person or what that person's true motives are or whether or not a person who says he has repented is telling the truth.

The reason why we, as men, are unqualified to do those things is because we are blind in these areas. Our own sin makes us blind. The illustration that is found in this section of scripture has to do with the eye. It is the picture of a person trying to remove a speck out of another person's eye. But it cannot be done, because the person who is trying to remove the speck has a plank in his own eye. In other words, he can't see. He is blind. He is unqualified for this kind of judgment.

In MATTHEW 15:14, Jesus refers to the Pharisees as being blind people who are leading blind people. Jesus said, "If a blind man leads another blind man, both will fall into the pit." Now a blind man leading another blind man is a somewhat frightening picture. But there is a picture even more frightening. It is a blind eye doctor trying to operate on the eye of another person. That is the picture we have in MATTHEW 7. The procedure of removing a foreign object from another person's eye is a very delicate operation. The eye is a very sensitive organ. It can be damaged easily.

Now if we transfer this picture to the spiritual realm, we can understand what Jesus is saying. As Christians, we are in the business of handling the souls of other human beings. The soul is the most sensitive thing in a man. How can we help remove the spiritual flaws in lives of other people? We cannot do it unless we are humble and sympathetic and conscious of our own sin and our own unworthiness. We cannot do it unless we are aware of our own limitations and admit that only God has the right to pronounce final judgments and to judge motives. We cannot do it unless we approach

the whole thing with tears in our eyes because we are moved by the hurt and the pain caused by the flaw we see in the other person. We cannot do it unless we have first experienced the joy of having our own flaws removed.

We must first take the plank out of our own eye before we can speak the truth in love with other people. Without taking the plank out of our own eye, it is impossible for us to be humble and understanding and sympathetic and generous when dealing with the souls of other people.

Don't judge people in the wrong way. This is what Jesus tells us, and He gives us three good reasons. First of all, God will judge us when we judge people in the wrong way. And we will determine the standards God will use to judge us. They will be the same standards we used to judge other people. That is the second reason we must avoid judging people the wrong way. And the last reason is that we are unqualified to judge people in a condemning way. And since we

cannot do it we shouldn't even try to do it.

The final thing I must say in this message is a personal note. Today I asked you to pray for the elders of our church. I consider them to be my friends. Last Sunday and today I have talked about the right and wrong ways to judge other people. Today I want to tell you that I am confident that all the elders of your church want to judge people in the right way. The very fact that we are struggling with some issues (and we are struggling) is a good sign. It means that we are concerned to get it right. Please do not come to the conclusion that I have preached these sermons to judge anyone in our church in a condemning way. This is where I am at in my preaching, and I must deal with the Bible as I see it. If I am directly pointing a finger at you in a condemning way, then I am guilty of violating the very command I am talking about. No, we must all point the finger at ourselves in light of this command. This truth must be self-applied. Help can come in no other way.