

*Basic Training: Clear Thinking in the Judgment Free Zone*  
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*Proverbs 24:23-25; 1 Corinthians 5:11-6:4; Matthew 7:1-6*

Friends, our final Scripture reading today comes from the gospel of Matthew 7:1-6. Let's listen to the Word of God together. "[Jesus taught,] "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. 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.'"

"Do not judge." Almost every American knows these three words from Jesus. The idea as most people understand it is really popular. The phrase "judgment-free zone" is in the Urban Dictionary. In fact, Planet Fitness has made a fortune off of branding itself a "judgment-free zone"; it's now the fastest-growing gym in America. It's supposed to be a place where you aren't intimidated to work out. It's a nice idea. But to do it, somebody's got to be judged. Bodybuilders aren't welcome. There's a "lunk alarm" to shame someone if they drop weights, lift too much weight, or grunt too much – it's in the membership contract! You can lose your membership over these things. It's not so much a judgment-free zone as it is a zone where people who are actually really into fitness are judged.

Jesus' teaching today is widely misunderstood. It simply isn't about what many people think it's about. Most people have never looked at the entire passage which actually calls upon followers of Jesus to exercise clear thinking and good judgment. Let's dig in and find out what it says to you and me and why a good understanding of it might change our lives for the better.

Jesus' word for judging is broad; it can mean anything from deciding to outright condemnation. We have to take the first two phrases together to get the point. "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." He's isn't saying not to think rightly, to make good judgments, even to be able to call sin out for what it is – He and the apostles do frequently – but He is saying, "If you want God to look on you with kindness and not condemnation, treat others with gentleness and compassion when they do something that troubles you."

Jesus speaks specifically against the Pharisees and their practices. Repeatedly, the Pharisees attacked Jesus for things that weren't a part of Jewish law. They were upset that the disciples didn't ceremonially wash their hands before they ate. They got mad that the disciples would grind a piece of wheat in their hands on the Sabbath to have something to eat. They hated that Jesus ate with tax collectors and people they had judged to be sinners. Jesus and the disciples did nothing wrong, but they broke the Pharisees' ideas of how to be good people.

But the Pharisees came up with all sorts of ways to justify breaking God's law! They would set aside part of their wealth and call it "devoted to God" so they didn't have to spend it taking care of their parents, breaking the commandment to honor them. They made up rules that allowed the rich to travel wherever they wanted on a Sabbath, breaking the spirit of the Sabbath rest, while the poor couldn't even go to a relative's home for Sabbath dinner. For these folks to judge Jesus and the disciples for breaking nonsense rules while finding ways to break the Ten Commandments was the height of hypocrisy. The Pharisees didn't just attack Jesus – they shunned folks, writing them off as hopeless, and condemning them without mercy.

Of course, the modern Christian church hasn't fully learned Jesus' lesson on this one. Even in my youth, I still heard the phrase, "Don't smoke, drink, or chew, or go with girls that do" as a valid Christian teaching. Everybody in the early church drank wine, so I guess there wasn't much of a dating pool! Some of the greatest Christian intellectuals smoked; many still do! How about movies and card playing as being evil? Rock and roll being of the devil?

Catha and I love Taylor University, our *alma mater*. But even today, casual dancing is prohibited. Last year, they made a concession by holding a couple dances on campus. Somewhere I missed in the Bible where dancing was a problem. In fact, King David danced before the LORD. Huh. Now some dancing crosses the line. But to ban it? It's still happening.

Jesus calls us out on downplaying our serious sins while highlighting the faults of others. We all do this. It's not about calling a spade a spade or a sin a sin. We hide from the truth. At some point in time when we've sinned, all of us have either said or thought, "Well, at least I'm not as bad as..." or "at least it wasn't as bad as..." We always have someone else to blame.

It started in the garden of Eden and we haven't quit since. God asks Adam, "Why did you eat of the forbidden fruit?" Adam answers, "Yeah, but...Eve made me!" God asks the same of Eve, and she answers, "Yeah, but...the serpent made me!" Blame the other guy! He's the sinner, not me! He's the guy who deserves to get it, not me! But God judges rightly and brings down the hammer on all three – Adam, Eve, and the serpent, based on what they'd done.

In Romans, Paul deals with a problem between Christians. Some Christians had begun buying meat in the marketplace that had been sacrificed to pagan idols before it went on sale. Some didn't care because idols are nothing, so the sacrifice meant nothing; others were disturbed because the meat was offered in a pagan temple in a pagan sacrifice and they would have nothing to do with it. Each side found fault with the other. Romans 14:12-13 teaches, "Each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way." As S. K. Weber in his commentary writes, "Our habitual response to Scripture must be to say, "What about me?", rather than "What about others?"" It's good to want our brother or sister in Christ to be right with God. But when we're listing faults, we start with ourselves.

That's where the log and the speck come in. It's another popular analogy used to shut down conversation. Typically, we hear it when we don't want to hear anybody's opinion about what's going on in our lives. How can we speak about issues in someone else's life when we have so many in our own? Jesus deals with it...but not quite the way we might expect.

Jesus never suggests that we can't help our fellow believers with a sin issue in their lives. In fact, He *encourages* it. His command is to deal with our own sins first so that we're clear-sighted enough to help someone else. This is a funny picture for serious business. Jesus' plank is huge; a tradesman would have to use all of his strength to haul into place. All I can picture is something out of a sitcom where someone goes around trying to help people and all he winds up doing is knocking them unconscious with a huge beam he can't even see!

But this is also common sense. Nobody would ever agree to somebody with a plank in their eye removing a speck from their own. I wouldn't trust the guy who got a D on his last math test to tutor me in geometry. You don't want to learn pitching from someone who beans every batter they face. You don't want relationship advice from someone who can't stay married!

If we have a plank in our eye, we need to get rid of it. Sometimes, we try to get rid of a speck in someone else's eye because we think it will distract people from the log in our own, and it just points out our flaws. The church has often fallen into condemning sins that few people coming every week are dealing with while ignoring the sins of those who sign big checks. We do this too when we talk at the coffee shop about the things that are destroying our country while not spending time in prayer asking God to deal with it and spending time out serving to fix it.

But planks can be removed. Churches can change. We can change. We can repent that we've ignored our own sins to point out the shortcomings of others. We can confess that we have too often done nothing to show others the love of Christ. We need to set aside our sins and hand them over to Christ to be nailed to the cross. We can do it. In our prayers, we can ask God to reveal the planks in our own vision and remove them so they no longer blur our sight.

If we've honestly done that, we are in a position to help others. We're never going to be perfect; we'll always have specks in our eye when we help others. But we also can be a guide and a light to fellow believers. James tells us to confess our sins to one another and pray for each other. Paul tells us to teach and admonish one another, and if someone is caught in a sin, to restore that person gently. Later in Matthew, Jesus will say, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." There is nothing wrong with using good judgment and recognizing someone else's sin. The issue is how we treat them – as a fellow disciple of Christ whom we love and show mercy and grace to, or as someone to disrespect and condemn.

But all the talk about not judging makes us nervous. Have we interpreted this passage rightly? Are we sure it doesn't mean not to ever mention sin? The proof that God still wants us to use good judgment is at the end of the passage. It proves Jesus wants us to sometimes make difficult judgments. He says, "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."

Dogs and pigs were unclean animals. Dogs in ancient Israel were not cuddly. They were not Lassie or Benji or Fluffy. They were somewhere between a coyote and a wolf. They were dangerous scavengers, and scavengers were officially unclean. Pigs were officially unclean by Jewish law and weren't found in Israel except when the land was occupied by foreigners. You want to talk about some harsh judgment – Jesus equates some people to dogs and pigs!

Jesus isn't talking about an ethnic or racial group; He's not criticizing all Jews or all pagans. Some people in every group are receptive to the gospel – the good news that God offers forgiveness to all who will believe in His Son Jesus and follow Him. It doesn't matter if we're rich or poor, young or old, our background – God brings His people to Himself, and they will be convicted and drawn to Him when they hear His plan of salvation through Jesus Christ.

But some people refuse to hear it and become enemies of the gospel. The Apostle Paul was one of these people. He actively hunted down Christians, threw them in jail, had them convicted, even executed. It wasn't until Jesus blinded him and appeared to him in a vision while he was traveling to Damascus that Paul repented of his sin. Later, once Paul has begun spreading the gospel all over the Roman Empire, he presents the gospel to the intellectual elite of Athens. Some people believe; some people want to hear more; others mock him. Paul pastors the believers; he discusses Christianity with the interested, overcoming their objections. But he doesn't go back to the Acropolis to try a second time to convince the mockers.

We love everyone we come across. We treat them charitably and believe the best of them. We recognize no one is beyond God's touch and salvation; God saves the worst of sinners. But some people aren't interested in listening. They are running from God. They mock Him. They don't want to talk with anyone who challenges their worldview, especially if those challenges come from what God says about Himself in His own book.

The Pew study released this week said that there are more people with no religious affiliation in this country now than there are Roman Catholics. Some have never heard the gospel and never met a Christian who showed them what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus. We have an obligation to reach them. But others hate what is holy. They've traded it in for what's hip and edgy. They have fallen in love with the lust and greed and destructiveness of our culture. Jesus says, if you present them with the deep truths of faith, they'll throw them back in your face and spit in your eye. Those folks we love, we pray for, and we leave well enough alone until and unless God does something miraculous to bring them around.

But how do we know who these people are? It often becomes obvious as we talk to them. But to make the decision to leave them to God and to work with others more receptive to the good news of Christ? That requires good judgment. And that's difficult for us to come by. We tend to work either in snap decisions, writing somebody off, or never coming to a conclusion and exercising bad judgment as a result.

So what do we do? I have a few quick thoughts about what to do when we are in a difficult situation that requires our moral judgment. First off, *not all moral issues require moral judgments, just a statement of the facts*. If somebody tells you that they've robbed a bank, and the Bible says, "Do not steal," there's no moral judgment necessary – what they have done is wrong by God's Word. If someone is married and they tell you they're seeing someone on the side, and the Bible says, "Do not commit adultery," there's no moral judgment in believing that's a moral failure according to Scripture. It's simply what God says. If someone has clearly and unashamedly done what the Bible says is wrong or immoral, then to say so is simply a statement of the facts.

Jesus has a conversation with a Samaritan woman by a well. Knowing her better than she knows herself, when she says she has no husband, he says, “That’s right. In fact, you have had five husbands, and the man you’re living with now is not your husband.” Jesus does not condemn her or tell her what an awful person she is. He simply states the facts.

When someone says to us, “don’t judge,” we need to figure out if they are doing something merely questionable or if they are clearly breaking a command of God. Right now, a lot of people use “don’t judge” as an excuse to do all sorts of things that are morally way out of line. To say that the Bible calls these things wrong just states the truth. No judgment necessary.

But second, *we need to pray earnestly how to deal with moral judgments with our Christian brothers and sisters.* Notice that I say Christian, not non-Christian, just like the text. Until a non-Christian becomes convicted of their sinfulness and their need for Christ and they turn to Him, telling them they’re sinning makes little sense. Hinduism says that cows are sacred reincarnated souls; every time I go to Wendy’s I’m eating an ancestor. But it means nothing to me because I’m not Hindu. In fact, I wouldn’t become a Hindu because beef is yummy! We pray for non-believers to see the truth, we tell them the truth, but we aren’t obligated to pester them about sins they don’t acknowledge are wrong. Be their friend, live in a Christian way, share the good news of what Jesus has done, pray for them to see the light, and let God work in their lives and convict them that they need to change.

Now to prayer. When we feel we need to make a moral decision about someone, we need to seek God in prayer. First, we pray about our own heart. Do we genuinely love the person involved, or are they nameless and faceless to us? Are we mad at the person or desiring to get even with them? We need to figure out if we are the person God wants to address this sin in their life, and we might need to change our attitude towards them.

Then we need to determine if the issue at hand is one that genuinely matters to God. Sometimes it does. Violence, anger, sexual immorality, blasphemy, theft, vicious backbiting and destructive slander – left unrepentant and unconfessed, these can push us out of eternal fellowship with God. But many matters don’t. Sometimes, we just don’t like something about a person. We focus on trivial issues – the smoke, drink, chew, and go out with girls who do. In prayer, we take these things before God and ask Him to show us if what matters to us matters to Him, and we ask Him to confirm it for us in His Word that He’s given to us.

Final, if we are led to confront a fellow Christian, we do it with a heart of love, remembering that God works in all sorts of hearts. God uses all kinds of people. He used the murderous Moses and the adulterous David. He used the loudmouth coward Peter and the vengeful Paul. Augustine, a key leader in the early church, was a skirt-chaser who kept a mistress and had an illegitimate son before he turned to Christ. In our modern day, Chuck Colson created Prison Fellowship Ministries, one of the first outreaches to those in American jails. Before he turned to Christ, the Nixon administration called him their “evil genius” who was an architect of the Watergate break-in. How can we judge these people? God used them to do amazing things. He forgave them, worked in them, and through them brought His Kingdom closer to us. Even the fiercest, cruelest, most dedicated sinner we know can be changed through God’s touch.

Friends, we here tonight who believe aren't judged. We aren't condemned. God has forgiven us and made us whole. If you don't trust in Jesus, I encourage you to turn to Him tonight, ask Him to be your Savior and Lord, and experience that forgiveness yourself. Let's not condemn others or judge them harshly when they fall to temptation. Let's approach them gently in a spirit of love, just as we would want to be treated if and when we fail. May we restore them in grace, just as we have received grace from our Heavenly Father.