

Do Not Judge
Matthew 7:1-6

“Don’t be so judgmental.” Have you ever heard that? If not, you have probably been living under a rock for the last twenty years. For if there is anything that the modern world believes and preaches, it is the creed of tolerance and acceptance. At all costs, we are to avoid any value judgments.

In the early 1960’s, Andy Warhol painted pictures of 32 Campbell’s Soup cans, and called it art. And it didn’t take long for the culture to tag along, saying, “Well, if he calls it art, it must be art.” Years later, Andres Serrano took a photograph of a crucifix submerged in urine. He called it art, and it was dutifully displayed in a North Carolina museum and won an award. And why? Because our society is bound and determined not to make value judgments.

Because of this, it is getting harder and harder to uphold even the most basic of social norms. Prayer and Bible reading in public schools? Not allowed – someone might be offended. Protecting the right of unborn babies to have a chance a life? Not a chance – you can’t force your beliefs on others. But, of course, if you’re a baker or a hotelier, you can be forced to participate in same-sex weddings despite any of your own beliefs. Yes, strangely enough these days, your beliefs can be compromised precisely to prevent you from passing judgment on anyone else’s beliefs.

Yes, from Oprah Winfrey to Rachel Maddow, the universities and the mass media continue their steady drumbeat – the only absolute truth is that there are no absolute truths. Anyone who claims to believe in truth, and especially biblical truth, must therefore be condemned as deplorable, bigoted or narrow minded. Good and evil don’t exist, because everything must be seen in shades of gray. All morality is relative. Don’t be judgmental of anyone or anything – that’s what we are told to believe.

And now we read these words of Jesus, “Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.” So, is Oprah right after all? Is Jesus really saying that He rejects all value judgments?

To ask the question is, of course, to answer it. Of course Jesus believes in the difference between righteousness and sin – the cross itself proves that. After all, if all morality really were relative, if every religion really were equally valid then Jesus would have had no need to be crucified to save us. And of course Jesus believes in truth, because He is the truth. But what then does He mean when He says, “Do not judge?”

It means that Jesus agrees with Oprah about at least one thing: we Christians are not called to set ourselves up as judges over other people. We are not to sit in judgment on anyone. Why is this?

Most obviously, because we are simply not competent to do so. And I hope we would all agree that competence is a critical requirement for any sort of judge. After all, you wouldn’t want someone who had never seen a football game to be a referee, would you? You wouldn’t want someone who had never read law to be elected to the Court of Appeals, would you?

Okay, so why are none of us competent to sit in judgment on anyone else? Most obviously because we can’t see inside anyone else’s hearts and minds. Let’s say, for example, that you are a trash collector, and you took a peek inside my trashcan before dumping it into your truck last week. You would have found several beer cans and a few whiskey bottles. On the basis of such evidence, you might be tempted to judge me. You might want to call me a drunk. But if you were to draw this conclusion, you would be missing an important fact – that I picked up all those cans and bottles from the street and sidewalk around my house. Because you didn’t understand all the facts, because you couldn’t see the whole picture, you were not competent to judge me.

In the same way, it's easy to pass judgment on those on the other side of our increasingly polarized partisan divide. It's easy to call them foolish, or even wicked. But what if those who clamor for more government spending on all sorts of social programs really are just trying to help the needy? What if those who oppose such spending really do care about the poor, but also believe that government just isn't the best engine for social change, or that government programs just don't work in the long run? Should we really demonize people for their policy positions when we don't know what's in their hearts? Are we really competent to sit in judgment on them?

But not only are we largely blind to others' thoughts and feelings. The sin in our own minds also tends to cloud our judgment. Yes, Jesus has come into the lives of all who trust in Him. Yes, Jesus has given our blind eyes new sight. But we must remember that our sight is not yet perfect because we are not yet transformed completely into Christ's image. Thus, even the best of Christians often have serious blind spots where it comes not only to the sin of others, but our own sin as well.

We can find an obvious example from the days before the War for Southern Independence. Back then, the great theologians of the South were united in their reverence for God's Word, and in their devotion to Jesus. They searched the Scriptures diligently and proclaimed them faithfully. And yet, very few of them could see the evil inherent in the institution of slavery. They were right about so much, but wrong about something that was terribly important. In other words, they, along with the rest of their culture, had a big blind spot. And we have to believe the same thing could be true for us too.

So, we should not sit in judgment on others because we can't see inside their hearts. We should not sit in judgment on others because our own perspective is distorted by sin. But we should also avoid judging other people because we have no authority to do so. I mean, I wear a black robe when I preach. Does that mean that I can go and sit in for Judge Tomika Irving? Of course not – I wasn't elected to serve as a Circuit Court Judge.

And if we remember the broader context of this passage, our lack of authority becomes even more clear. For remember, over the last few weeks we have learned that God is our Sovereign King, our Heavenly Father Who provides for all of our needs. Moreover, as we saw in our responsive reading from Psalm 2, God has placed all the nations of the world under the authority of His begotten Son, the King Who alone has the power to break them with a rod of iron, shattering them in pieces.

So, if that's true, who are we, mere subjects of God's Kingdom, to set ourselves up as somehow better than other people, to sit in judgment on other subjects? No, all of us are too limited, too sinful to stand in the place of our all-seeking, all-knowing Almighty King. God is the judge of all human beings – that's just not our job.

But at this point we must part company with Oprah and stand instead with Jesus Christ. For if we are incompetent to pass judgment on other people, and if we have no authority to pass judgment on other people, we are nevertheless commanded to make value judgments concerning all sorts of things that people do. For if we are subjects in God's Kingdom, that means we must acknowledge that God's Will is law and that God's Word is in fact true. And thus, along with the great reformers of the church, we must take our stand on the firm foundation of the Holy Scriptures, measuring all human actions according to God's Word which has been revealed to us.

But such an uncompromising embrace of the truth will often set us at odds with the unbelieving world, especially with those who deny the existence of absolute truth, those who thus reject Christ's claim to be the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. After all, at the end of today's passage, Jesus reminds us that dogs do not respect what is holy and pigs do not care about what is precious. In the same way, those who continue to be in active rebellion against Christ's righteous rule do not seek the holiness of Christ, or value what He thinks about how any of us should live.

And so it's no wonder Jesus said that we should expect the world to misunderstand and persecute those who are loyal to Him and His Word. For the dogs of this world surrounded and attacked the Holy One of God. The pigs of this world turned on the precious, spotless Lamb of God and tore Him to pieces. Should we therefore expect better treatment than He received when we say what He said and try to live as He lives?

Now, given all of this, given the fact that we have neither the competence nor the authority to judge other people, and given the fact that those who are not loyal to King Jesus don't really want to hear what we say about Him, we might be tempted to give up on the possibility of evangelism altogether. We might decide to retreat into our holy huddles, keeping our heads down, and letting the unbelieving world do what it wants. I mean, why try to spread the good news? Why try to convince people of the truth of God's Word if they don't want to listen?

Well, I don't know about you, but I'm sure glad that all my Sunday School teachers didn't come to that conclusion. I'm glad all the pastors and seminary professors and Christian authors I've learned from didn't just hide their heads in the sand and let me go to Hell. I'm glad they took the time and trouble to explain God's Word clearly to me so that I learned to know Jesus and to trust Him more and more.

For if we are not competent to sit in judgment on anyone else, we should have no illusions about the state of our own hearts and minds. And if we believe the gospel, that means admitting that we all started out as rebels against God. We all started out caring no more for God's holiness than dogs do. We all started out caring no more for the precious truths of the gospel than pigs do. We all had to have God's word taught to us by honest, earnest Christians, and to have the Holy Spirit apply that truth to our hearts so that we came to faith in Christ. So surely we should try to do the same thing for others who are just as rebellious as we ourselves once were.

But how can we do this work of evangelism, how can we present the claims of Christ to a lost and dying world without at the same time sitting in judgment on them? By remembering who we continue to be: nothing more than sinners in need of a savior. And isn't that what Jesus is saying in today's passage – that even the most mature of Christians continue to have beams in our eyes, barriers of sin that keep us from seeing ourselves or others as we really are? And so, until we bring our own lives into greater agreement with God's Word, until we put more of our own sin to death, we won't be able to help anyone else see Jesus clearly, no matter how winsome or wise our words may be.

And in verse 5, Jesus gives us the biggest reason why this is so. For it isn't just that our sin warps our vision, preventing us from seeing ourselves and others as we really are. No, the problem is our hypocrisy, the fact that we are all too eager to condemn sin in other people's lives while we remain indifferent and even oblivious to our own equally serious problems.

And why is our hypocrisy such a hindrance to our efforts to spread the gospel? Well, why should we expect anyone to listen to what we know God's Word says about their sin when we aren't paying attention to what it says about ours? Why should we expect anyone else to consider God's word to be holy and precious when we turn away from it whenever we want to?

But there's one other reason that we need to deal with our own sin before we make any attempt to point out the sin of others: confronting the sin in our own lives is a supremely humbling thing. Being honest about the things we've done or the things we've left undone brings us to a greater understanding of how much we still need a Savior. Such honesty and humility thus help us see God's grace in our lives ever more clearly.

And unless we really grasp the truth of God's grace for ourselves, we'll never be able to share it effectively with others. That's why we have to acknowledge the beam in our own eye and do our best to remove it before we can help others remove the specks of their sin – there's no way we can explain the gospel of God's grace until we live out the gospel in true confession and true repentance, until we see ourselves as nothing more than sinners saved by grace.

So, of course ignorant, unworthy sinners like us have no business sitting in judgment on anyone else. But as forgiven and freed sinners, shouldn't we try to share the good news of Jesus even with those who might not want to hear it at first? Shouldn't we try to demonstrate His truth, His righteousness, His love and His grace even to those with whom we disagree most strongly? Shouldn't we seek a clearer vision of Christ for ourselves, so that others may see Him more clearly in us?