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Title: Hard Things Jesus Said

Series: Do Not Judge

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Text: [Matthew 7:1-5](#)

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Today is the third sermon in a series of three on *Hard Things Jesus Said*. We started with “Love Your Enemies.” Last week was “Do Not Worry” and this week—“Do Not Judge.” They are hard to hear and even harder to put into practice. We found all of these in a sermon that Jesus preached called the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon begins back in Matthew 5 with the “bless-eds” or what we call the “Beatitudes,” and we’re now in chapter 7, so this sermon has been going on awhile.

There is perhaps no passage in all the Bible more misapplied and misunderstood than Matthew 7:1, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged” (Matthew 7:1). I don’t think I would be exaggerating too much to say that every Christian knows some form of this saying by heart. Some may not know that it comes from the Bible and most likely couldn’t tell you where to find it. The reason it is so well known is that most people mistakenly employ this passage to mean that no one should ever evaluate or criticize anyone for anything.

Jesus, with these words, touches on an issue in which very few of us, dare I say none of us, can claim innocence—passing judgment on others. Sometimes we call it gossip, which seems harmless enough, and very often it is relatively harmless. And yet, other times, we can spend hours—days, even years—tearing other people apart. What Jesus says is so true. We focus on a tiny speck in someone else’s eye while there is a large plank in our own.

We must confess that it’s easier to criticize someone else than it is to criticize ourselves. That is probably why we are so fond of indulging in this exercise. Our purpose is not so much to bring another person down as to bring ourselves up. We have this need to make sure that we are on the right side—whatever that is—and that we are better than someone else. One way to even things up is to bring them down.

But, as Jesus says, this is a kind of hypocrisy. Given our own faults, what right do we have to sit in judgment on another? So often our judgments are based on purely external or incomplete evidence. We condemn others while being ignorant of motives; we judge without knowing another person’s

story—and, you know, we all have a story. Judging is so fun that we forget that only God is in a position to make an accurate judgment of a person’s strengths or weaknesses.

Add to this that the common translation of Matthew 7:1, “Do not judge” is probably not the most accurate or helpful given the context in which he is speaking. We make judgments every day, despite the disclaimers, “it’s not for me to judge” or “to each to their own.” We would be in deep trouble and frequent danger if we did not make judgements about people, situations, and actions. On the face of it, the translation “do not judge” perpetuates a sense that the Bible is out of touch with everyday life. It implies that the Sermon on the Mount suggests something that is impossible to put into consistent practice.

In reality, much of Jesus’ sermon encourages people to make judgments or discernments about how they live in relation to God’s purposes. In the previous chapter, Jesus has judged synagogue practices, Gentile prayer, and lives focused on material goods. (Remember that’s what he was talking about when he said, “do not worry.”) A better translation of the Greek in this context might be to use the word “condemn” instead of “judge.”¹ The verb used here designates condemning people to be eternally outside of God’s reach. This use indicates a translation of “condemn” that might be better read, “Do not go on condemning people to be outside the love of God” (Matthew 7:1). That’s likely what Jesus was seeing in his ministry.

When read like this, this can address various situations involving other people: conflict, fear of outsiders, intolerance of difference, prejudice, disdain, anger. In such situations, people can write others off as being beyond redemption, outside of God’s grace, and consign them to be unsaveable. The command forbids the arrogance of denying mercy, even dignity, to another. Followers of Jesus have no right to declare that someone—anyone—is beyond God’s mercy.

In my first church out of seminary, the chair of the mission committee told the senior pastor and me, the associate, that he wanted to make a point in the coming Sunday morning worship. He likely told the senior minister more precisely what he was going to do because I remember being caught off guard. About halfway through worship, a shabbily dressed man with unkempt hair and beard, wandered into the sanctuary and sat next to a nicely dressed couple. I don’t think the man had showered in a few days as the couple slid down the pew in the opposite direction. At the coffee time after worship, no one seemed to engage the man. Only near the end of that fellowship time was it revealed that this disheveled man was Terry, the chair of the mission committee, making a point about our welcome to those different from us. We were all surprised and, if we were honest, ashamed.

By the middle of chapter seven—beyond where we ended today, Jesus is starting to wrap up this sermon. For me, verse 12 sums up the Sermon on the Mount: “In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12). You should recognize that as the “Golden Rule”—yet another “hard thing that Jesus said.” Not condemning people to be outside the love of God is another way of expressing the great commandment of love—love God with your whole being, and love others as you love yourself. To love others is to do to them what you would have them do to you. If you are not outside of God’s love, neither are they.

¹ From Commentary on Matthew 7:1-14, 24-29, February 10, 2019 by Warren Carter found at www.workingpreacher.org.

Condemning others flows out of prideful and self-centered attitudes. In contrast to these, Jesus calls us to have different attitudes. Blessed are the merciful, blessed are the peacemakers. Forgive other people when they sin against you. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Love others unconditionally as God loves them. When we love, we give up self-centered attitudes and judgment and condemnation begin to waste away.

What we don't want to see about this passage is that it is really talking about self-awareness. It's that old saying of when you point your finger at someone, there are three fingers pointing back at you. This passage, when read beyond that first verse, is mostly about self-correction, but no one wants to get that far in the reading. Removing that plank from our eye is another way of saying that before we make any evaluation of another, we need to be sure that our view is totally free from any prejudice or bias. What no one wants to admit is that this statement from Jesus is more about us than it is about others. "You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Matthew 7:5). Jesus makes it painfully obvious that we often see the speck in someone else's life when we have logs of our own to contend with first.

While it's a dated illustration because very few people hang laundry out to dry anymore, it still makes the point. A young couple moved into a new neighborhood. The next morning while they are eating breakfast, the man sees their neighbor hanging the wash out on the clothesline. "That laundry is not very clean," he said. "She obviously doesn't know how to wash correctly. Perhaps she needs better detergent." The wife looked on but remained silent. Every time the neighbor would hang her wash to dry, the man would make the same comments. About a month later, the man was surprised to see a nice clean wash on the line and said to his wife: "Look, she has learned how to wash correctly. I wonder who taught her this?" The wife said, "I got up early this morning and cleaned our windows."²

There are some signs that your windows may be dirtier than the neighbor's laundry, some signs that you may be judging others. This is the part of the sermon that gets uncomfortable for you and for me.

1. Are you more enraged at someone else's sin than you are embarrassed by your own? Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that formation in the image of Christ occurs only by being drawn into the form of Jesus Christ, by being conformed to the unique form of the one who became human, was crucified, and is risen. This does not happen as we strive "to become like Jesus," as we customarily say, but as the form of Jesus Christ himself so works on us that it molds us, conforming our form to Christ's own.

2. Do you refuse to forgive? To refuse to forgive someone is to be almost entirely ignorant of the enormity of what God has forgiven you. Forgiveness means absorbing the debt and offering love and goodness in return.

3. Do you "cut off" those who disagree with you? This is the essence of judging. When you disagree strongly with someone and because you can't agree, you cut them off. You say, in essence, that you love your position on a particular issue more than you love the person. Not condemning means that you stay committed to loving those who passionately disagree with you. The best example of this is Jesus with Judas. Even after Judas betrayed him, Jesus says to him, "Friend, why have you come?" Friend. Jesus offers the hand of friendship to him—and to us.³

² <https://www.preaching.com/sermon-illustrations/illustration-judging-others/>

³ These three taken from a list of seven found at 7 Signs That You're "Judging" Others, June 2, 2014 by J.D. Greear found at www.jdgreear.com.

Jesus' questions should lead us to take a moment of deep introspection, examining our own life. An unexamined life is not worth living, Socrates said at his trial. In John 8, the Pharisees bring to Jesus a woman caught in the act of adultery. She is clearly guilty, and they are all ready to carry out judgment on her. Yet Jesus said: "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). Do Jesus' questions in verses 3 and 4—"Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own?"—expose anything in your life? Any logs needing removal? Most of us, if we're honest, don't need tweezers for the splinter, we need a commercial chainsaw for the log.

What is so wrong about our judgmental attitude is that it is carried out by our own personal standard as the measuring rod of what is right or wrong. We don't judge people by God's standard but by our own baggage. A judgmental person plays God, since they claim that they can perfectly read the motives and intentions in another person's heart. They act as if they are all-knowing, and thus know everything about everything at all times. This is the definition of arrogance! This is the kind of judging which Jesus condemns as he starts to wrap up his sermon. Whenever we assign people to condemnation without mercy because they do not do something the way we think it ought to be done or because we believe their motives are wrong, we pass judgment that only God is qualified to make.

Jesus dealt with the adulterous woman not from a position of judgment but forgiveness! Forgiveness was his starting point. I believe that's how God wants to deal with us, too. When we seek God's help to pull out the planks in our own lives, we experience God's deep grace of forgiveness; we experience cleansing and healing. Then we gain perspective we didn't have—seeing others clearly from a position of grace and humility. Instead of throwing stones at people, we can interact with them from a place of respect and dignity and grace, just like Jesus did. Not condemning others as being outside the reach of God's love changes everything. It changes us as individuals. It defines who we are as a church. It allows us to have the holy strength to bear any matter, to offer real acceptance that some have never known inside the church community. May we be such people—such a church. Amen.