

The Sermon on the Mount:

Mercy Triumphs over Judgment

John 8:1-11 Matthew 7:1-6; 12

Return to the sermon on the Mount—Matt.5-7. We ended at chapter six, and now we pick up at chapter 7. Quick review: I'm interpreting the sermon on the mount as Jesus' teaching us how to see clearly. First, with beatitudes, to see *the world* as he sees it (see *others* as he sees them)—and it's upside-down and backwards. Second, with the teaching "you are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world" he is teaching us to see *ourselves* as he sees us—as people of positive influence in the world. Then third, when Jesus says that he has not come to abolish the law and prophets but to fulfill them, he is teaching us to see *him*, to see *Jesus*, as he sees himself and his purpose. As the One who fulfills the longings and desires and the need for salvation, which were promised in the old testament. We've just celebrated that during Advent and Christmas—the fulfillment of the need and longing for a Savior (the name Jesus—Yeshua—means "God saves.").

The teaching from there on in Matt. 5, 6 and 7 is specific teaching on how to see rightly, to see clearly, and therefore act accordingly. And this call to have clarity of vision continues in Matthew 7, as we shall see.

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is on your own eye? 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.”

“Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and tear you to pieces.”

v. 12: (the golden rule): “In everything do to others as you would have them to do you; for this is the law and the prophets.”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

“Do not judge, so you may not be judged.” How many times have we heard people quote that?? It’s so familiar and that phrase gets tossed around, carelessly sometimes. Do you ever hear people quote this and wonder to yourself, “Is that what Jesus meant?”

What *does* Jesus mean here?

The word “judge” is the word “krino” in the Greek (k-r-i-n-o)—it’s related to the English word “critical.” It’s a very common word in the New Testament and appears dozens of times the gospels and Paul’s letters.

It is used in 3 ways, mainly, in the New Testament; let’s look at those and ask, which way is Jesus using this word in our teaching from the Sermon on the Mount? Here are 3 representative Scriptures that illustrate the 3 different ways it’s used in the New Testament:

1. Titus 3:12—the apostle Paul says “I have decided (krino’d) to spend the winter here.” In that context, it means to decide, discern, to use good judgment. Is that what Jesus is saying? “Do not use good judgment, or good judgment will be used on you?” Obviously not. That’s the first way the word krino is used: to discern, to use good judgment in order to make an informed decision. This is the word that Paul uses in the lists of his qualifications for church leaders—leaders are to be discerners.

2. John 18:31—Pontius Pilate is trying to wash his hands of Jesus. Pilate says to Jesus’ accusers: “Take him yourselves and judge him (krino him) according to your law.” In that context, he is referring to a courtroom setting. To judge in a court of law. So, in our passage from the sermon on the mount, is Jesus telling us to do

away with courts, juries, trials, judges and lawyers? No. Btw, with this meaning the word is also translated as “condemn,” to find guilty. John 8 example...

3. 1Cor.4:5: The word ‘krino’ is used in the first half of this passage, but the second half explains what it means: *“Therefore do not pronounce judgment (krino) before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of people’s hearts.”* So “krino” here is, (a) something God does; and (b) is the searching of the motives of the human heart. Which, to reiterate, is *God’s* job.

This third example is the meaning of the word “judge” in this passage in the Sermon on the Mount.

It means to evaluate someone in the sense that I am being critical of them, or feel like it’s my job to expose them and their motives. And if I do that, I’m taking God’s place—I’m doing what only God is supposed to do, and what only God is *qualified* to do.

That’s the basic meaning, on the surface, of what it means to judge. Now, looking at this entire teaching about judging, logs, specks, pigs, dogs, and pearls, reveals that judgment has its roots in a far deeper impulse, from a human

relationship standpoint. What it reveals is that judging, at its root, is the attempt to control someone.

Judging is attempting to control someone through correcting, criticizing, or shaming; because I believe I know their motives. It's trying to get a person to see how wrong or how flawed they are in order to get them to change. So, I may harp on them about their thinking or their flaws in hopes that they will see the light. Are we familiar with that strategy? Does it ever work??

I struggle with this as, perhaps, some of you do. It's so easy to be critical of others and feel like I need to expose their flaws and "help" them change. Somebody's gotta do it, right?! But when I'm honest with myself often times when I find myself in the mind trap of thinking I *need* to criticize or correct someone, I'm usually trying to get them to change to be something that better fits *my* purposes, or makes me feel better. You're not fitting into my plans for your life, or for my life, so I'll keep attempting to correct you until you see things my way, or better fit my purposes, or stop making me uncomfortable. Never mind that *I* might be wrong, or not see things clearly.

So, judging is trying to change someone or control them, using negative means and trying to expose motives.

Skip ahead now to dogs and pigs—don't give what is holy to dogs, don't throw pearls before swine. I read this and I have to ask: was this a problem back in the 1st century? Were there large numbers of people throwing pearls to pigs, and Jesus said, "I have come to say 'Enough! No more pearls thrown to pigs.'" If you have to say it, it must have been an issue. What does this have to do with the passage about judging? Everything, actually. This is where the brilliance of Jesus' insight comes out.

A pearl is a good thing; it's valuable. The problem with a pig being thrown a pearl is: they are unable to appreciate a good thing or its value. They don't know what to do with this good thing since they are unable to appreciate it. They can't digest it (literally, pigs cannot digest pearls, so I've been told, so it's actually harmful to them). And *figuratively* speaking, it's true as well—sometimes others can't digest what we're telling them or doing for them, even if it is a good and valuable thing.

What has Jesus done here? What he is saying is, sometimes judging someone is the attempt to control them or get them to do what we want them to do through negative means (criticism, etc, as mentioned). But sometimes judging is the attempt to control someone with *good* things, even *valuable* things:

“Here is an article you really need to read—it proves my point” (subtext: that I’m right and you’re wrong). Or, “Here is some unsolicited good advice, to improve your life” (subtext: your life is a mess and I know what can make it better). Has someone tried to do something like that to you? Or have you done that to someone? If so, what was their reaction?

Have you ever known someone who got dragged to church or sent to a Christian camp by an earnest adult, or had Jesus thrown at them, and after a while they wanted nothing to do with the church or with the faith again? Sometimes *the gospel* is the good and valuable—the holy—thing that people try to give to others, when they may not be prepared to appreciate the value of it.

Jesus is saying here, don’t give something good to people who aren’t yet ready to receive it, otherwise they will trample it under foot, then turn and write us off, or worse. It’s a form of judgment. It’s just dressed up nicer.

Does this make sense? We want to give people something good, but they may not be ready to receive it, or appreciate it. And if we try too hard to feed it to them, so to speak, they may react strongly against it.

This opens up a whole conversation about the Holy Spirit’s role in evangelism, and our role in witnessing and evangelism. That’s a great topic for

another time. Because we do have a responsibility to be witnesses: you are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world. But in that passage Jesus says, 'let your *light* shine before others, so people *see* your good *deeds*.' He didn't say, 'Let people hear your good opinions' or our well-articulated criticisms. Let your actions be your witness. Mostly, let love be your witness. And let the Spirit lead you, in love, to share the good news when the time is right. *When the time is right. And when our vision is clear.* Which leads to the log & speck in our eyes part of the teaching.

Let's look at what Jesus says about that, and then we'll pull it all together. Jesus says, don't try "help" someone and take a speck out of their eye when we've got a log in our eye. Jesus' original audience would've thought this was hilarious. A bit of theatre, some comedy on Jesus' part—using a hyperbolic and overblown illustration. The people would've thought: this guy is hilarious. And it *is* funny, it's so overblown.

What's the point? The point is: do we want to truly help somebody? Jesus says, before we attempt to help someone else, do some deep self-reflection first. Start with our own need for corrective vision; our own faults and our own sense of powerlessness. Ask God, "Show me the logs in my eyes. What logs do I have?"

Where do I need my vision clarified?" And when God reveals those to you and to me, surrender them to God and work on them together.

In the recovery movement this is step 4 of the 12 steps. And here it is for all of us recovering sinners: step 4 is a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. It's what Jesus was saying to the Pharisees with regard to the woman they were about to judge (John 8): if any of you are without sin, go ahead and start throwing rocks at her. In other words, do some self-reflection. Make an inventory of your own life and motives and actions. Take the log out of your eye. Work on correcting *your* vision.

This is King David, who in Psalm 139 says, "Search **me** O God, and know **my** heart. See if there is any wicked way in **me** and lead **me** in the way everlasting." He says this when he's frustrated and bewildered by enemies and wrongdoers.

In the context of the entire prayer, it's as if David is saying, Lord please remove this frequent obsession I have to fuss over someone else and how bad they are or how wrong they are, and let's you and me work on **my** heart, and the path you have set **me** on. He's asking God to show him the logs in his eye.

In a way David is entrusting others to God and then entrusting himself to God. To let others be God's business. And work in partnership with God to help clear his heart and his vision.

And that's what our Lord is communicating to us throughout the entire Sermon on the Mount, going back to chapter 5: entrust ourselves to God, and work on our hearts. Then, entrust others to God and let God be the one who evaluates them, exposing whatever needs to be exposed, and so deal with them according to his mercy.

When we entrust others to God, we can love them. We can show them mercy. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. And we are merciful when we understand that *we don't have clear enough vision to judge others*. We know we have blind spots, and we are willing to work on those. Then, we come with an understanding and a sympathy and a mercy toward others, because we know that we are just as frail flawed. **And** that we are also beloved and accepted. Because when we can be honest with God about ourselves, we experience his mercy, and grace.

Jesus doesn't tell us not to exercise good judgment and discernment. Jesus doesn't tell us not to help others, or to correct others. He just says that we can

become the kind of people who are *truly* helpful to others when we entrust ourselves to God and own our own stuff first, and entrust others to God.

This teaching really is a kindness from our Lord. He's saying, "Look, if you choose to judge, the consequences are harmful *to you*. What goes around comes around—a spirit of judgment creates its own feedback loop. So Jesus is being kind to us by saying, "Friends, there is a much better way to approach your relationships and interactions with others. That is, with mercy and understanding."

So this teaching is an illustration of the 5th beatitude: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." That's the heart of this teaching.

I think of it this way: Whew! What a relief! I don't *have to* judge anyone!! I can let go of the burden. I don't have to spend gobs of time and energy trying to figure out and expose others' motives. That's God's job. There is great freedom in this. What a relief!

So, we can pray, "God, help me to have clear vision! To see myself clearly and honestly, and to see others with eyes of mercy.

There is a fantastic phrase the Heidi and I like, and use, and there are a couple ways of saying it. The rhythmical way of saying it is: It's better to be curious than furious. Better to be curious than furious. The other way of saying it is: It's better to be curious than judgmental. It's better to be curious—about myself, and my reactions (“Why did I react that way to what someone said or did? Why do I think that?”). And then we can be curious about another person; we can wonder, compassionately, about what they might be feeling and experiencing. Try to see things from their viewpoint and experience.

I try to live by the assumption that all people are carrying a burden of some kind. Everyone is carrying a burden of some kind. And so what people need is kindness, and support. Judgment—whether in the form of a pearl or a criticism—only affirms to them what they might already be feeling and thinking about themselves to begin with. Our witness of compassion and kindness is like a breath of fresh air for people who might be suffocating under stress, or grief, or struggling with life's circumstances.

Oswald Chambers (from his devotional classic, “My Utmost for His Highest”): *“Cultivate the uncritical temper. Beware of anything that puts you in the superior person's place; stop having a measuring rod for other people. There*

is always one fact more in every person's case about which we know nothing.

Who of us would dare to stand before God and say, "My God, judge me as I have judged my fellow man"? God judges us all through the marvelous atonement of Jesus Christ."

Pray with me: Jesus, this teaching is not easy. So, we ask first of all that we might know the depths of your love and compassion for ourselves. That we might experience your mercy, and your grace. And as we rest in that mercy and grace, give us eyes to see as you see. Help us to see others as you see them. We recognize that this is a tall order, but we dare to trust that you know what's best for each person. Jesus, be our healer—in this case, specifically, our spiritual optometrist—to clarify our vision. And as David prayed in Psalm 19, may the words of our mouths, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.