

JUDGING VS. GRACIOUS DISCERNMENT (Christian Character for Challenging Times)

Matthew 7:1-8 - October 4, 2020 - Immanuel - Senior Pastor: Dr. Kelly McClendon

Living in the tri-state area has many advantages. We are near the intersection of Kentucky, Indiana, and Ohio and we have access to all they have to offer. I love living here - except during election seasons. Do you know why? Because if we turn on the TV we are forced to listen to political ads from three different states, two of which we don't even get to vote in! For most candidates, the ads which simply say what they're for or against, are outnumbered three to one by negative attacks ads that ridicule and exaggerate or imagine the worst possible aspects of their opponent - often in snarky, sarcastic, and petty ways.

Since it has become an important way to stay connected to church members during this pandemic, **I spend more time on social media than I would like.** However, after seeing people being rude as they argue and virtually shout each other down on Facebook each day - I just can't stand another political diatribe when I get home. You know what a meme is right? It's usually an image or photo with a quote or saying on it that becomes a fad. Sometimes it is ironic, rude, funny, or poignant. There is one I see often that really resonates with me. It shows the actor Michael Duncan Clark, who played death row inmate John Coffey in the film "The Green Mile." In it he says, *"I'm tired boss, most of all I'm tired of people being ugly to each other."* Many times that's the most real thing I see on Facebook.

Rest assured, I don't intend to talk about the sore subject of politics today, or take sides in the election here, or even rant about the pitfalls of social media. But I will say that the climate in both areas is an illustration of what I want to talk about in this new sermon series. In my opinion, they are examples of what's wrong in our culture now - on both sides. We've forgotten how to talk to each other with civility, and how listen to each other with patience, and how to be kind and gracious to each other. Frankly, I don't expect everyone to do that well, now or ever, but if we claim to be disciples of Christ, then we should be different from the unbelievers around us, and we should always be learning how to better relate to other people and how to communicate and interact with the wisdom and graciousness of Christ.

To be clear, I see hurtful, hateful, and shameful behavior coming from people on every point on the political and social spectrum, and in many aspects of the media and popular culture - so there's enough guilt to go around and then around again. So what's my point? Simply this - we need to learn to how to treat other people better - especially in challenging times, especially if we're disciples of Christ. We need to exhibit Christian character.

So for the next several weeks I want to talk about how to better relate to people and how to better handle challenging situations as Christ would want us to. I want to start with **judging.**

How many of you have ever served on Jury Duty? I love legal issues and courtroom dramas - so I think I would find that interesting - but I've only been called up once and I was scheduled to travel out of the country so I was excused. The only time I have been in a courtroom, before a judge, is when I was there to offer moral support to people in trouble.

I read about a man was chosen for jury duty but he wanted to get out of it. He tried every excuse but nothing worked. On the day of the trial he decided to give it one more shot. As the trial was about to begin, he asked to approach the bench. *"Your Honor," he said, "I must be excused because I am prejudiced against the defendant. I took one look at the man in his blue suit with those beady eyes and that dishonest face and I said 'He's clearly a crook! He's guilty, guilty!' So your Honor, I cannot possibly stay on this jury!"* With a tired annoyance, the judge replied, *"Get back in the jury box. That man is the lawyer."*

Many people try to get out of jury duty - but then there are other people, many other people, who act as if they are permanently on jury duty - they are always volunteering to sit in judgement of others. They're eager to point out any mistake. They're ever ready to catch someone in wrong doing. They're ready to find faults and condemn the "sinful" acts of others. They're angry and indignant. If they could, they'd put on a robe and grab a gavel and sit on the bench to judge and sentence people to the punishment they think they deserve.

Unfortunately some people who act like that are Christians. They give a bad reputation to other Christians so that many people, especially nonbelievers, have memorized a verse of Scripture that they use as a "wild card" or "hall pass" to defend themselves and their behavior. However, the people who use this verse the most, usually understand it the least.

There are two versions of this popular verse. In Luke 6:37 we read how Jesus said, *"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned."* The more familiar passage is from the gospel of Matthew 7:1-2, where Jesus says, *"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."*

It's amazing that even people who never read the Bible seem to know this verse. It may be the most quoted verse in the Bible in our society. You may have had these verses quoted back at you when you said something was "right" or "wrong." People say, *"Hey - don't judge me?"* That's what Jesus clearly meant... right? Well, actually, it is not that simple.

Is Jesus telling us to express no opinion as to what is right and wrong? Or that all morality is relative and there are no absolute standards for truth or goodness? NO. If we respect the truth of God's Word, then we must conclude that some behaviors and ideas are morally wrong in God's eyes. Everyone is not free to do and think whatever they choose, not if you believe there is a God to whom we're accountable and who has given boundaries.

Later in this same chapter, after telling us not to "judge," Jesus tells us that we must look at the "fruit" and evaluate the lifestyle of teachers and leaders to judge whether they are worth following. The Bible tells us to "flee from evil" which requires us to make judgments about what is evil and what is not. We're told to obey what Jesus says, which is usually different from what the world says, which means there are some things we must see as wrong.

Apart from faith issues, there is a great hypocrisy among those who say, *“Hey don’t judge.”* Partly because they are doing it themselves even as they criticize others, and because we can’t escape making judgments - because every decision we make is a kind of value judgment.

For example, I heard about a woman who left the morning worship service and said to the pastor, *“Thanks, I really enjoyed the sermon.”* So, she judged the sermon as “valuable.” Of course the minister was very pleased, but with false humility he said, *“Don’t thank me sister, thank the Lord!”* And she replied, *“It wasn’t THAT good.”*

We are constantly and necessarily making judgments about behaviors and ideas - our own and those of others. You can’t fully avoid doing it in the course of life.

Suppose you work in a factory and you are not following the required safety procedures. When the supervisor tells you to correct the problem, you say, *“Judge not, lest you be judged.”* How do you think the supervisor will respond? Hope you have some savings!

Imagine a football team in the film room and on a busted play the coach says to you, *“Hey, that play failed because you were in the wrong spot! You were supposed to be doing this...”* What would happen if you interrupted and said, *“Coach, don’t forget, Jesus said, ‘Judge Not, lest you be judged!’”* Hope you like sitting on the bench!

Suppose you’re a surgical intern operating on a patient and the resident says, *“Stop! Don’t cut there!”* and you say, *“Doc, judge not or you will be judged.”* Hope you got insurance!

What if a teacher hands back a test and you complain about your grade saying, *“Hey, who are you to Judge me?”* I hope you like detention!

In each case we see the absurdity of the argument. Judgments have to be made all the time to correct what’s wrong, and to determine the right course in life. Jesus isn’t forbidding making judgments - better understood as **discernment** - He’s forbidding a condemning spirit. **“Discernment”** can be defined as *“the ability to judge well.”* However, for Christian’s it also means spiritual perception with a view to learning & sharing God’s wisdom and love. It is first seeking God’s truth, and then speaking that truth in love.

Here are some implications of all of this:

We should not judge the motives of another person. Only God can see people’s hearts - or motives - perfectly clear.

We should work hard to be fair. This means we try to understand people and the reasons they do what they do. We need talk **to** people rather than talk **about** them or **against** them.

We should be slow to speak. We need to carefully check out the things we hear and even the things we see with our own eyes, because we know how easy it is to misunderstand. There is often more to a person’s story and to the context than we realize.

We should never conclude that someone is beyond hope - because Christ came to save the lost and He can bring hope into the most hopeless of situations. Even in the face of the worst behavior we can imagine we should try to love and point people to the grace of God.

We should remember that lost people tend to act like lost people. Don't be shocked, or disgusted by what they say and do, instead be compassionate, and remind yourself that they need Christ to help them do better. What they are doing or saying may be wrong, but you won't be able to convince them of that just by telling them it is wrong. They need to start where you and I started - with someone offering us a grace that we didn't deserve.

It is good to speak the truth - but only in love, with compassion and kindness - with the motive to seek and to save the lost. Sometimes that means we should say very little so can keep the lines of communication open until we have an opportunity to share Christ.

In others words - nonbelievers don't need us to point out everything they are doing that is wrong - they need us to point them to Jesus in everything we say and do.

If we are in Christ, by grace through faith, then we are people who are forgiven, saved, loved, accepted, in the process of being made holy. **We can afford to be generous.** We must be people who relate to others with our arms open in love rather than with our arms crossed in anger or our fingers pointed in accusation. Why? Because we just want others to find the same love and grace, we have found in Jesus - that is the main point.

Please know that this doesn't mean we condone or accept sin in other people's lives, or even remain silent about it. Why? Because sin always leads people away from God. True love cannot join the chorus of people saying to sinners, "*Hey you just do you! It's all good.*"

Sometimes, in counseling, someone will, in effect, ask me to approve of the sinful things they are doing - or accept their excuses for wanting to continue in that behavior. In these situations I tell people, "*I can't tell you that what you're doing is right, because I believe the Bible says it is not. However, I can tell you that I love you, and God loves you and God wants more for your life than what you've settled for. I can tell you that if you turn to Christ, you can be forgiven - because that's what Jesus did for me. Like me, you will need to let go of many things, before you'll be able to take hold of the hand which is reaching out to you.*" Sometimes people accept that - and sometimes they say, "*Don't judge me!*" and storm out of my office. Many in the Bible responded that way to the prophets and to Jesus and His apostles. It **still stings**, but my conscience is clear that I have spoken the truth in love.

Let's read Matt 7:2-5 again. Jesus said,

"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."

In Greek, the word for judge here is “*krino*,” which has a range of meanings. It can mean to judge judicially (as in a court of law), or it can mean to discern or to evaluate, and it can also mean to condemn. Luke adds more detail, he quotes Jesus as saying, “*Condemn not and you will not be condemned.*”

The sense in which Jesus is negatively using the word “judge” is the last one. It is not about judicial matters, and it does not eliminate the need for church or doctrinal discipline, nor does it relieve us of responsibility to be careful about the choices we make, or even to be discerning and wise about evaluating and challenging the choices of others.

What it means is this - don't be condemning in your judgement. Don't take the place of God and pass final judgement on the soul or the worth and value of another person. It also means that you must not be a joyful faultfinder, someone who is always on jury duty, someone who delights in giving more attention to the sins of others than to their own.

In verse 3 Jesus said, “*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?*” The picture Jesus paints is ridiculous. Most of us have heard it so many times that it has lost its humorous twist, but the people in Jesus' audience were probably laughing out loud. It sounds like a scene out of the Three Stooges. Here's one guy with a little piece of sawdust in his eye. There's somebody else with a four by four sticking out from his face, and he's trying to get that speck out. Every time he turns around, the other guy has to duck. He is knocking everyone down and tearing up stuff. It is a comical scene - but in fact it is acted out for real most every day by someone.

The Greek word for “look” here means to gaze or stare - in other words, it is to be fixated on something. It is speaking of people who have no time to consider the sin in their own life, because they are always looking for the sin in others or the slightest misstep of anyone else.

In a “Peanuts” comic strip, Linus asks Lucy, “*Why are you always so anxious to criticize me?*” She answers, “*I just think I have a knack for seeing other people's faults.*” “*What about your own faults?*” asks Linus. Her response, “*I have a knack for overlooking them.*”

That is the tendency we need to fight in ourselves until we overcome it by God's grace.

We typically judge other people more harshly than we judge ourselves, and certainly more harshly than we hope God judges us. I've been guilty of that. This sermon, like most of my sermons is “aspirational” meaning I “aspire” or aim or hope to live like this. So this message is for me as much as anyone else, I often fail, but by God grace, I'm trying to go this way.

I believe the real point of Jesus' message here is this - if we are going to practice judgement or discernment with others, He wants us to do it like He would, meaning with the hope of connecting them to the redemptive love and undeserved grace that God offers in Christ. Our desire is for salvation and never for condemnation. The bible teaches that there will come a time of condemnation for those who choose to refuse Christ and all His offers of grace - but no one on earth should be pleased about it and no one in heaven will be rejoicing about it either.

Galatians 6:1 says, *"Brothers and sisters, if someone is overcome by some sin, you who are spiritual should humbly and gently help to restore them, to help that person back onto the right path."* If, out of love, we believe God has called us to intervene, then our goal is to restore the person, to help them get back on the right track moving toward God.

The Greek word for "restore" is the same one used for setting broken bones so that they can heal. Our interest must only be to facilitate the healing of a person. And if that process is likened to that of setting broken bones, how should we go about it? First we recognize that our efforts might hurt, so we must try to restore the person gently and with loving care.

Once again - let me come back to a part of this text I want to reemphasize today.

Judging others with discernment should not be done without first judging ourselves.

A certain man wanted to impress his friends with his eye for art as they went to an art gallery together but he forgot his glasses. Like me he couldn't hardly see his hand in front of his face without them. But he figured he could wing it by being arrogant and snooty like many art critics. So he approached a frame and began criticizing: *'Why would anyone want to paint something so ugly? I mean, I guess it's a true rendering of the object, but why waste time by painting such a disgusting subject?'* Soon everyone was laughing as his wife whispered into his ear, *'Frank, it's a mirror!'*

Judgment must begin each morning as we look into the mirror and compare ourselves to the love and sacrifice that Christ made for others! We need to spend more time looking at our own shortcomings so we won't so tempted to focus all our attention on the faults of others. If we are in Christ, when we remember our brokenness, it reminds us of the great gift of grace and how much we need it - just like everyone else we meet needs it too.

Judge yourself first - don't stop there - but you must in fact start there. In other words, take the plank out of your own eye and then go help with the sawdust in the eyes of others.

When I look closely at my face in the mirror, I often say to myself,

"Wow - you're a man who desperately needs a savior. You have failed and fallen too many times to count. You're a man who needs grace and forgiveness - otherwise you would be lost and without hope in this world. On your own - you have nothing to boast about."

But then I look again - and I remember what God says about me and has done for me.

Then I say to myself,

“You do have a SAVIOR - and His name is Jesus - and He died for you so that your sins would be forgiven and so God could heal the brokenness in your life. You are a beloved child of God who has been given a grace you could never earn or deserve. God has done great things for you, and He isn’t finished yet. You’ve been blessed by God’s grace, now live it, and go share it with others.”

And then when I see another person I wonder what they see when they look in the mirror?

Then, I wonder how God can use me in their life - to help them experience the saving grace of Christ the same way that other people have helped me along the way. And I ask God to guide my words and actions so that everything I say and do points people to Jesus.

Before we speak up to judge others, even with careful discernment, whether in person, or on social media, we need to be sure that our only motive is speaking the truth in gracious love.