

“Passing Judgment on Judging”

16 February 2020

Text: Matthew 7: 1 - 12

Rev. Peter Coutts

“Judge not, that ye be not judged”. We all learned this in Sunday school. But this simple rule is not so simple in application. We make judgments daily: to choose right from wrong, this way over that way, to pick what is more helpful from less helpful. Good judgments keep everything going. But we are not to be “judgmental”. Here’s the distinction. You go to a doctor, who listens to your chest, asks questions about your lifestyle and then says, “It’s my opinion that your pack a day habit and lack of exercise is seriously increasing your risk for heart disease and lung cancer. You should quit”. That is making a judgment. Now, a doctor might also say, “What are you thinking! Can’t you read the warning labels on the packages? This stuff can kill you! Man, how stupid are you?”. Now, that’s being judgmental, and leads to a short career for a doctor. Judgmentalism like this is pervasive.

Jesus spoke of a different way. The Sermon on the Mount passage we read this morning ended with one of Jesus’ best generalizations about life. “Therefore, in everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Mt. 7:12). The Golden Rule is introduced with the word “therefore”, which means that the directions which precede it are really specific illustrations of this summary rule of thumb. “Don’t judge others, so that you may not be judged” (vs. 1). Jesus went on to explain why. In verse 2 He pointed to a natural, human nature reaction to judging / condemning / blaming someone. He said, “What you give out you will get back in full measure”. If you judge others they will pass judgment on you right back. How true! “You left the gate open and the dog got out of the yard!” “Well, you let the dog out into the yard without checking the gate!” “You didn’t mail that proposal in time to meet the deadline!” “Hey, you didn’t tell me there was a deadline” “Yes, I did!” “No, you didn’t!”. We’ve all heard some version of this conversation!

Clearly, actions taken by people sometimes need to be corrected, but there are different ways of doing it. Being judgmental, Jesus said, is not one of them. Being judgmental tends to be a put down of another person. Judgmental statements not only seek to correct, but also control (“I’m right, you’re wrong, and it has to be my way”). Judgmental words often arise as a reaction to strong feelings: anger, contempt, envy, embarrassment. Because of these feelings, judgmental pronouncements frequently are issued with an intent to hurt or punish, verbally. And we can feel hurt, so we too easily react by hurting back.

Actually, Jesus’ observation points out something important. In practical terms, as a means of seeking change in another person, this tends not to work. Jesus noted that you will tend to get back what you dish out. This means, in the end, the issue at the root of a confrontation will get lost in those feelings and motivations. In fact, as we all know, these little exchanges can leave our relationships damaged even further, making it even harder to effect that change we sought in the first place.

Jesus goes on to make another point about passing judgment on another. He said, “Why do you point out the speck in your neighbour’s eye when you can’t even see the log stuck in your eye? You hypocrite! First take the log out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour’s eye” (vs. 4,5). The point: judgmental people are not as pure as they think they are. Back in my Navy days when I was teaching navigation, I quickly discovered that a significant number of people have trouble telling their right from their left... or their port from their starboard in our case. This is not helpful for a future navigator! It can get you in trouble if you say “port” when you really mean “starboard”. Some people have such a chronic problem with this we had a training aid to help them. It consisted of a construction hard hat and a large children’s plastic bat. If someone was so hopeless at learning left from right, we’d make them wear the helmet and then bat them on the head every time they tried to turn the ship the wrong way. It was a practice rooted in military pedagogy: that humiliation goes a long way to teach some people. Besides, it was fun. It was fun until the day several of my students saw me almost turn our ship into the side of a BC Ferry... by saying “port” instead of “starboard”. They later came to the bridge with the helmet for me to wear. I got the message, and I never used the bat again.

Removing the plank of a judgmental spirit becomes the first step towards offering real helpful correction and encouragement, rather than criticism. What would you rather receive: constructive criticism or dismissive judgmentalism? As Jesus said, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you”.

The beauty of the Golden Rule is that it’s not a rule at all. It is a perspective. It calls us to stop and think before we act.... that we might respond carefully. When people have real issues with us – conflicts to resolve, hurts which need mending, personal practices and habits of ours which need changing – how would we like them to approach us about these things? Well, we’d like them to approach us with respect, with honesty but humility, with understanding and compassion, evenness rather than anger, in a way which seeks to build me up rather than knock me down. Stopping for a moment to think through this perspective gives us a chance to cool off – to let go of some of that anger, contempt, envy, embarrassment – it gives us a chance to focus more on what is really at issue rather than indulging our desire to put down or hurt or punish. As you would have people do to you, do also to them.

This passage is not just about judgmentalism, but it also speaks about making good judgments. It’s noteworthy that between the “Do not judge” teaching and the Golden Rule are two other teachings which speak of good judgment. The first is a very odd one: “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw pearls before swine” (vs 6). It is very unclear who is to be considered the dogs and the pigs, or what Jesus was referring to in talking about what is holy and pearls. However, what is clear in this short teaching is the need to make careful judgments concerning what is holy and what is valuable. Jesus was saying, make careful decisions about who you share these things with. The making of good judgments is also a part of the illustration for Jesus’ famous teaching about prayer: “seek and ye shall find”. In illustration Jesus said, “If your children ask for bread, will you give them stones? If they ask for fish, will you give them a snake? You know what is good for your children” (vs 9-11)”. The illustration talks about how parents naturally make good judgments for their children’s welfare. The point: God makes good judgments too, regarding your welfare, knowing how best to respond to us when we ask God for

something in prayer. So Jesus was saying: trust God for God has your best interests at heart. God makes good judgments.

So, in this part of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus was making some important distinctions: do not be judgmental of others in life, but recognize the real need to make good judgments in life. In regards to these things, do to others as you would have them do to you. And what do we want to happen to us? None of us want to be the victim of judgmentalism. All of us hope that that judgments that impact us will be fair, understanding and compassionate. That's Jesus' encouragement here. My largest learnings regarding these teachings came in the summer I spent 35 years ago at the Presbyterian street mission in Toronto called Evangel Hall. My time there really surfaced some personal prejudices that I didn't appreciate that I had. Prejudice: pre-judgments, preconceived opinions not based on fact. I went there with the vague, unassessed assumption that a lot of these guys on the street had really chosen to be in that situation. I discovered that many had deep psychiatric problems: not severe enough to institutionalize them, but disruptive enough that they couldn't cope with mainstream living. I thought the smoking habit that most of them had made no sense for men who had so little money. I learned that for people captive to addiction, it was the safest addiction to have. I helped one pretty responsible impoverished man one day move from one flophouse to another. Everything he owned could be put in a backpack... except for his colour TV. I thought: what a luxury! Until my boss told me that the most dangerous thing for poor, single, out-of-work men is the unmanageably huge amount of free time they have... free time with nothing to do that can get them into more trouble than anything else. TV was free entertainment with an antenna. I accidentally came across one of our guys attempting to break into a store during a downpour. "What an idiot" I thought to myself. But I quickly saw that he had no appreciation that this was wrong. To him, it was a logical solution to get out of the rain. He wanted to be dry, and this made sense. I learned a lot about the realities of poverty that summer, but I learned more about me. I learned that I could be prejudiced: that I could make pre-judgments, have preconceived opinions not based on fact. And as the judgmentalism shrank room was made for something else: compassion.

A black and white illustration, to be sure, of the nature and danger of judgmentalism. Most of the time, for any of us, the challenges we face are much more grey... much more difficult to figure out... and our own judgmental attitudes can be far more hidden and obscured from understanding. So good judgment is a great capacity for any of us to develop to root out judgmentalism.

In fact, how will people react to us if we apply good judgment in our families, workplace, church? They will react to us with respect and appreciation, right? How will they react to us if we are judgmental? Which way would you rather be seen? As Jesus wrapped up this part of his sermon, "Therefore, do unto others as you would have them do unto you."