

Discernment

Matthew 7:1-6

Series: The Sermon on the Mount – Spring 2021

Preaching Date: April 18, 2021

Worship: God of Mercy

Key Sentence:

As you examine yourself you can refuse both judgmentalism and false tolerance.

Outline:

I. Discern judgmentalism and refuse it. (Matthew 7:1-2)

II. Discern personal fault and repent it. (Matthew 7:3-5)

III. Discern false tolerance and reject it. (Matthew 7:6)

Matthew 7:1–6 “Judge not, that you be not judged. ²For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

³Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.

⁶“Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.

Discernment Matthew 7:1-6

We're back in the Sermon on the Mount today, and we've got four more weeks to cover Matthew chapter 7. Let me summarize some points from chapters 5 and 6. Jesus started with the beatitudes, "blessed are the poor in spirit," "blessed are those who mourn," etc. These showed us that his whole proposal for life in the kingdom was to be based on counter-cultural humility. It's a life of dependence – we recognize our spiritual need and inadequacy, and we hunger and thirst for a righteousness that can only be satisfied in him. And he satisfies. It is by this weak side approach to life and service, by this dependence on Jesus, that we become the salt of the earth, the light of the world.

Despite this radically dependent approach to Christian life and ethics, Jesus next insisted that he had not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. He has fulfilled them in his life, death and resurrection, so that as we trust him we have new life and the Spirit. In this we too can begin to live out a righteousness far deeper than of the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus then gave six examples of that deeper righteousness. The Pharisees knew Scripture to say "you shall not commit adultery," but Jesus made it a heart issue: "everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." People tolerate anger, but Jesus says that anger is the heart equivalent of murder. He teaches us that in the upside-down kingdom we are called to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us so that we may be sons of our Father who is in heaven. That was chapter 5.

In chapter 6 he began to tell us how this deeper righteousness is lived out. He said that if you live your life to be seen, that's all you get is seen, but that God rewards those who simply, quietly do good. He gave us a model prayer, to a Father in heaven who is concerned with our physical and spiritual needs. He warned us that laying up treasures on earth is ultimately futile, that we cannot serve both God and money. Finally, in the last message before we turned our attention to Easter, he showed us that in dependence on God we do not need to be anxious or worried, for he is the provider.

That brings us to Matthew 7 where Jesus returns to the subject of our relationships in his kingdom and teaches us how to avoid wrong judgment while having a clear-eyed discernment that is helpful to others and protective of the kingdom. We'll have to define a few of these words, but my key sentence for this morning goes like this "As you examine yourself you can refuse both judgmentalism and false tolerance."

Let's read Matthew 7:1-6 *“Judge not, that you be not judged. ²For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. ³Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. ⁶“Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.”*

It has been said that Matthew 7:1 “Judge not, that you be not judged” is the most popular Bible verse in our culture, even more popular among non-Christians than among Christians. And it is a great verse, don't get me wrong, but it is widely misunderstood. Looking online, I found several Quora questions that addressed this issue. The one with the most interesting answers was “what should a Christian say to someone that says: ‘Don't judge me’ or ‘Stop judging everyone,’ when that person doesn't understand the context given in the Bible?” Let me give a few of the answers, across the range:

“You say ‘I apologize. You're right. It's not my place to judge.’ Then you continue through life allowing others to be themselves. I think the most important point is that the trait of being “judgmental” is not, in any way, a desirable or positive human characteristic. Quite the contrary. The related connotations associated with one person judging another, particularly if it is verbally expressed to the other person, are all negative.”

“They should stop judging. They should focus on their own lives, not someone else's, especially not the lives of non-Christians. It does not matter at all, not one little bit, what the Bible says. We live in a nation with people of diverse faiths, a secular nation, it is not your job whatsoever to butt your nose into business that is simply not yours.” “Use the Bible for your own personal edification and learning; don't use it to lecture or browbeat other people.”

“Judging people arrogates to yourself the power to really know what's going on inside a person, to understand where they are coming from, to grasp all the forces pushing on them to believe, say or behave a certain way. Often we cannot know enough about what shaped us and is going on in us (under the surface, behind our illusions and self-delusions) to judge [even] our own case.” “As God's people we need to make a judgment in order to draw the line between good and bad. What we cannot do is condemn. Pronouncing a sentence is a privilege reserved for God and if we choose to usurp that privilege, we are open to the ramifications of being condemned ourselves.”

But in all these answers, even the good ones – oops, sorry, I’m judging – in all these answers nobody really addressed the part about explaining the context. John Stott, in his commentary, does that. He says “our Lord’s injunction to ‘judge not’ cannot be understood as a command to suspend our critical faculties in relation to other people, to turn a blind eye to their faults and to refuse to discern between truth and error, goodness and evil.” How can we be sure that Jesus was not referring to these things? Here are Stott’s answers: (1) Partly because it would not be honest to behave like this, but hypocritical, and we know from this and other passages his love of integrity and hatred of hypocrisy. (2) Partly because it would contradict the nature of man whose creation in God’s image includes the ability to make value-judgments. (3) Partly because much of Christ’s teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is based on the assumption that we will use our critical powers. For example, we have repeatedly heard that call to develop a righteousness which exceeds that of the Pharisees, to do ‘more than others’ in the standard of love we adopt, not to be like the hypocrites in our piety or like the heathen in our ambition. But how can we possibly obey all this teaching unless we first evaluate the behavior of others and then strive to make ours different from and higher than theirs?”

If Jesus did not mean to abandon all judgment, even of other people, what did he mean? Let’s take that word judgment first, and recognize that it can be morally neutral. I can judge that real apples are better than plastic apples without violating Jesus’ command. In a math contest I can judge that the person who says “2+2=5” is wrong, a judgment of fact. This often extends to moral issues. I can judge that a medicine that harms everyone who receives it is a bad medicine, especially compared to one that cures those who receive it. I can judge that a person who, for whatever reason, kills those around him, should be restrained and removed from the opportunity to exhibit that behavior.

As Stott said, judgment is necessary to human life. But if we modify the word just a little bit, we get the word judgmental. This is judgment without adequate information. It is a pre-disposition to view certain things or certain people in a negative light based only on some external appearance or superficial understanding. And if we add one more suffix we get the word judgmentalism. Not everyone agrees this is a real word. But those who do define it point to a habit of being judgmental, of forming opinions based on superficials or appearances. Other commentators use different words. R. Kent Hughes uses the word ‘condemn,’ to pass judgment in a way that attacks a person and not just a behavior. The Greek work translated ‘judge’ has implications of not just making a judgment but imposing a punishment.

Stott uses an even more obscure word, “ensoriousness,” but explains it well: “The follower of Jesus is a ‘critic’ in the sense of using his powers of discernment, but not a ‘judge’ in the sense of being censorious. Censoriousness is a compound sin consisting of several unpleasant ingredients. The censorious critic is a fault-finder who is negative and destructive towards other people and actively seeks out their failings. He puts the worst possible construction on their motives, pours cold water on their schemes and is ungenerous towards their mistakes.” Isn’t that right? Isn’t that what Jesus is pushing back against?

Judgmentalism sets itself up in authority to condemn and punish others. But what would give me that right? As Paul wrote to the Romans, applying Matthew 7:1 to their situation: “Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls” He says “Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.” “To be censorious,” Stott says, is to “to anticipate the day of judgment, to usurp the prerogative of the divine Judge, to try to play God.”

Not only are we not the judge, we will be judged with the greater strictness ourselves if we dare to judge others. Verse 2: “For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.” If we enjoy being the judge we must not be surprised to find ourselves as the accused. As Paul put it, “Therefore, you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you the judge are doing the very same things.”

How then do we know if we are making a necessary evaluation or a judgmental condemnation? This is where we need discernment, which means being able to see the subtleties that lead to a right conclusion. Let me give a few ways of cultivating this discernment. One: pray. “Lord, what am I seeing? What is really going on here? Lord, give me your heart toward this person, toward everyone involved in this situation.” And because you stopped to pray, it’s easier to do number two, which is don’t rush to judgment. Don’t jump to conclusions. If being judgmental means condemning from inadequate data, then try to get information, to figure out what’s really going on. In anything relational this probably means talking to the person, asking them for their story without having jumped to conclusions before the conversation.

Three, try to discern where this apparent behavior or attitude or external appearance fits with Scriptural teaching. What is the sin here, if any? And am I presuming a sinful attitude from behavior that’s not really sinful? Can I say clearly that here is a Scriptural reason to make a judgment?”

Fourth, would be ‘examine yourself,’ but Jesus covers that in the next section. Verse 3: “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” This is hypocrisy, meddling in the issues of others while failing to deal with our own more serious faults. We are unfit to be judges not only because we are fallible humans (and not God), but also because we are fallen humans. The fall has made all of us sinners. So we are in no position to sit in judgment on our fellow sinners.

The picture of somebody struggling with the delicate operation of removing a speck of dirt from a friend’s eye, while a vast log in his own eye entirely obscures his vision, is ludicrous. Don’t ever say Jesus doesn’t have a sense of humor. Yet when the image is transferred to us and our ridiculous fault-finding, we don’t get the joke. We exaggerate the faults of others and minimize our own. We make excuses for ourselves and allow no latitude to others. Jesus is not overly harsh when he says, verse 5, “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” Our hypocrisy is compounded by the fact that an apparent act of kindness (taking a speck of dirt from someone’s eye) is used to inflate our own ego. In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus commented on this perversity. He told it ‘to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others’. The Pharisee made an odious and inaccurate comparison, magnifying both his own virtue and the publican’s vice.

We are called to hold ourselves to at least as strict and critical a standard as we apply to others. ‘If we judged ourselves truly’, wrote Paul, ‘we should not be judged.’ We would not only escape the judgment of God; we would also be in a position humbly and gently to help an erring brother. Having first removed the log from our own eye, we would see clearly to take the speck from his. Some people suppose that by these verses Jesus was forbidding us to even try to help others caught in sin. He was telling us, they say, to mind our own business. Not so. Not always. The fact that judgmentalism and hypocrisy are forbidden us does not relieve us of responsibility towards one another. Jesus will later teach that if our brother sins against us, our first duty is “go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.” Jesus commands us to do this eye surgery. A bit of dirt in the eye is, after all, rightly called a ‘foreign’ body. It doesn’t belong there. It is always alien, usually painful and sometimes dangerous. To leave it there would hardly be brotherly love.

It is evident that Jesus is not condemning criticism as such, but rather the criticism of others when we exercise no comparable self-criticism; nor correction as such, but rather the correction of others when we have not first corrected ourselves.

Stott says “The standard of Jesus for relationships in the Christian counter-culture is high and healthy. In all our attitudes and behavior towards others we are to play neither the judge nor the hypocrite but the brother [or sister], caring for others so much that we first blame and correct ourselves and then seek to be constructive in the help we give them.”

For the second time we come up against discernment. In this case it is discerning my own fault to be confessed and repented. One. Pray. Especially pray for humility and insight. “Lord, what is my responsibility in this situation. Lord, what do I characteristically do that affects my thinking about this situation.” Two. Confess to God. Where you find a similar or a contrasting sin in your own life, or sin toward the person or people in this situation, repent of the behavior, confess it to God and pray for strength to avoid this sin in the future. Third, if needed, confess this sin to the person or people in the situation and ask for forgiveness. Only after that can you gently confront this person or people with what you’ve discerned is a Biblical issue too significant to let go.

So, discern judgmentalism and refuse it. Discern personal fault and repent it. Finally discern false tolerance and reject it. Verse 6: “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.” This verse, while not as famous as verse 1, contains some pretty startling language for Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. But Jesus didn’t pull punches. His outspokenness led him to call Herod Antipas ‘that fox’ and hypocritical Pharisees ‘whitewashed tombs’ and a ‘brood of vipers’. Here he affirms that there are people whose rebellion makes them like animals, accurately described as ‘dogs’ and ‘pigs.’ This actually provides a healthy balance. If we are not to ‘judge’ others, finding fault with them in a judgmental, condemning or hypocritical way, we are also not to practice false tolerance, ignoring hurtful faults and pretending that everybody is OK. Both extremes are to be avoided. Stott says “the saints are not judges, but the saints are not simpletons either.” If we first remove the log from our eye and thus see clearly to take a speck from another person’s eye, they, if they are truly believers, will come to appreciate our concern. But there will always be some who will push back hard and refuse to take any good even from godly counsel. According to the book of Proverbs, this is one of the distinctions between a wise person and a fool: “Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you.”

Who then are these ‘dogs’ and ‘pigs’? By giving them these names Jesus is saying they are behaving like animals with particularly foul habits. The dogs he had in mind were not the well-behaved clean dogs that we have, but the wild dogs, vagabonds and mongrels, which scavenged in the city’s rubbish dumps.

Pigs were unclean animals to the Jew, not to mention their gluttony and love for mud. The apostle Peter was later to refer to them by bringing together two proverbs: ‘The dog turns back to his own vomit,’ and ‘The sow is washed only to wallow in the mire.’ In other words some people will turn from good news, or good correction and wallow in their sin. And Jesus’ command is that we should not show false tolerance to those committed to this wallowing. The picture is plain. A Jew would never hand ‘holy’ food, previously offered in sacrifice, to unclean dogs. Nor would he ever dream of throwing pearls to pigs. They would probably mistake the pearls for nuts or peas, try to eat them and then, finding them inedible, trample on them. The dogs, continuing to be hungry, might turn and assault the giver. The NET Bible points out that “This verse is a chiasm of the pattern a-b-b-a, in which the first and last clauses belong together (“dogs ... turn around and tear you to pieces”) and the second and third clauses belong together (“pigs ... trample them under their feet”).

But if the picture is clear, what does it mean? What is the ‘holy’ thing? and what are the ‘pearls’? One link is to the parable of the “pearl of great price,” which refers to the kingdom of God and by extension to the gospel. “But,” Stott says, “we cannot possibly deduce from this that Jesus was forbidding us to preach the gospel to unbelievers. To suppose this would stand the whole New Testament on its head and contradict the Great Commission.” The ‘dogs’ and ‘pigs’ whom we must stop interacting with are those who have had ample opportunity to turn from sin and have decisively rejected it. These might be non-believers who are rejecting and opposing the good news of Christ. Or they might be believers who refuse to hear godly counsel and are continuing on paths of sin and drawing others. Either way, Jesus is saying, at some point you reject unwarranted tolerance and leave them to their inhuman behavior.

This is not a unique idea in Scripture. Jesus applied the same principle to the ministry of the disciples when he sent them out. He warned them that in every town and house they entered, although some people would be receptive or ‘worthy’, others would be unreceptive or ‘unworthy’. “If anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.” The apostle Paul also followed this principle in his mission work. On his first expedition he and Barnabas said to the Jews who ‘contradicted’ their preaching in Pisidian Antioch: “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles.” He had to do the same thing in Corinth and later in Rome. So also today, if you have the opportunity to share the Gospel and receive condemnation and criticism, you may be called to stop and move on to someone more open whom you can bless with the good news of forgiveness from sin and shame.

Among believers we see the same thing in the process of church discipline. Paul says that “if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.” Jesus says later in Matthew “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” At the end of the process there is this sad giving up on the person who refuses to listen. We see this played out in the church at Corinth. In First Corinthians Paul counsels the church to cast out an immoral brother who won’t listen. But in the 2nd letter when this person has repented Paul says that fellowship ought to be restored.

There is also an application here to social media. Too many Christians have gotten caught up in harmful social media debates with those whose only purpose is to ridicule the gospel and bring dissension into the church. It seems to me that most of us are called to say no to such debates which in general serve no positive purpose. In all the social media comment wars that I’ve ever scrolled, I’ve never seen someone even grow closer to Christ. It’s pearls before swine.

Again this requires discernment. One. Pray. “Lord, is this antagonism unmoving and ongoing? “Is this antagonism threatening or hurting others?” Or “Lord, am I overreacting to this?” Two. Seek counsel. I can’t tell you how many times my perspective has been skewed or biased and other have been able to help me see a situation in a better way. Three. If you do step away from a situation, leave the door open so that you can still go to them or they can come to you.

There is so much more that could be said about all three segments of this teaching, but we’re out of time. Let me leave you with the outline. By God’s power and God’s grace examine yourself and discern judgmentalism or unwarranted condemnation in yourself and refuse it. Discern your own personal fault and responsibility and repent it. But also discern if you are displaying a false tolerance when real sin and rebellion is involved, and if so, reject it.

Jesus makes no promise of what will happen if you walk this path. But I can tell you it’s all blessing. The criticism of Christian judgmentalism will be muted. You will walk closer to God through having that log out of your eye. And those who are in rebellion against God’s good news will be clearly set apart. And, you may witness the turning of some to a closer walk with our Jesus.