

Logs vs. Specks: Don't Judge!
Romans 14:1-12 and Matthew 7:1-6
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Do not judge. It's hard to imagine how Jesus could get any more direct or plainspoken than that. Throughout the entire Sermon on the Mount Jesus has been talking about what kind of people Kingdom people are—what kind of character they have, what their priorities are, how they live before God and what kind of community they form together. Again and again his teaching has asked us to do some serious soul-searching. He knows our hearts, and he wants us have an honest appraisal of them as well.

It hasn't been easy, hearing this sermon of Jesus. I think Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who served for many years as the pastor in London's Westminster Chapel, captured it well when he said, "There never has been such a Sermon as this. It finds us all somehow, somewhere. There is no possibility of escape; it searches us out in all our hiding places and brings us out into the light of God. There is nothing that so utterly condemns us as the Sermon on the Mount; there is nothing so utterly impossible, so terrifying....it is a Sermon before which we all stand completely naked and altogether without hope. Far from being something practical that we can take up and put into practice, it is of all teaching the most impossible if we are left to ourselves."

There was a time when I would have heard Dr. Lloyd-Jones' assessment and just thrown up my hands in frustration: what's the point if it's all hopeless and impossible? It sounds so depressing, so outrageous. It even sounds like a set-up. Obviously, I'm supposed to be and to do these things that Jesus talks about, yet clearly I'm going to fail and never measure up. That sounds like a recipe for anxiety, despair and exhaustion. The image of a rat on a wheel comes to mind.

The irony is that that is precisely what Jesus wants to free us from. What Jesus lays out in the Sermon on the Mount is the opportunity to live in total trust and surrender to the One who knows us and loves us to the depths of our being. Instead of a rat running in circles on a wheel, the more accurate image is of a child who leaps off the top of the playhouse, arms open wide and squealing in delight, with absolute, 100% certainty that his parent is going to catch him. The child's faith in his parent frees him to live in joy and delight. There is no worry, no fear,

no second-guessing, no trying to measure up. He simply trusts and enjoys his parent's unconditional love for him.

To the degree that we choose to trust our divine parent and put into practice what Jesus, teaches us in his sermon, we, too, will experience life with that same kind of joyful abandon. A significant key to our ability to do this is to look more to God than we do to other people for our sense of identity and significance. So many of the judgments we make really have to do with us. We have the fatal tendency to exaggerate the faults of others and to minimize the gravity of our own, thereby exalting ourselves by disparaging others, which in the words of theologian A.B. Bruce is "a very cheap way of attaining moral superiority." (Stott, p. 178)

The word which is translated in Matthew 7 as "judge" is a word that occurs frequently in the New Testament, and it is used in a number of different ways. It can mean to weigh carefully and form an opinion, such as when Paul says to the Corinthians, "I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say." (1 Corinthians 10:15) It can be used to infer or draw a conclusion, as when Jesus says to Simon in Luke 7:43: "You have judged rightly." It can mean "if you regard me" as in Acts 16:15, where Lydia says to Paul, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." After Jesus has been arrested and is standing before Pilate, Pilate uses the word to mean, "put on trial before a court". The word can also have the meaning of condemnation or despising.

So, the first question we need to ask is what is the meaning that Jesus has in mind here? One interpretation is that Jesus means these words to be taken simply and literally in which case a Christian should never express an opinion about others. Such an interpretation essentially requires us to suspend our critical faculties, to turn a blind eye to any and all faults, to reject all criticism and to refuse to discriminate between truth and error, goodness and evil. A second interpretation, which was held by Tolstoy, stated that in this verse "Christ totally forbids the human institution of any law court." Both because of the context and the witness of the rest of Scripture, both of these interpretations can and must be rejected.

Instead, what Jesus is forbidding in his directive, "do not judge" is judgment that condemns, that reviles another person and pronounces a judgment about their worth as a human being. This kind of judging comes from a spirit that has some tell-tale characteristics. First, it is a self-righteous spirit. There is a feeling of superiority that comes from judging that we are all right while others are not. This is precisely what earned such ire from Jesus with regards to the Pharisees. The

thing that pre-eminently characterized the Pharisees was the very high regard they had for themselves and the utter contempt they held for all who were not part of their sect. We see it, for example, in Luke 18:11 where the Pharisee stands outside the temple praying, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people; thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” In their self-righteousness, the Pharisees passed judgment on others, while they were blind to their own glaring faults. The follower of Christ is to do exactly the opposite. We are to judge ourselves unsparingly while leaving the judgment of others to God and God alone.

In addition to being self-righteous, the condemning spirit is hypercritical. In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul makes a point of saying that love “hopes all things and believes all things.” But, not for the person with the hypercritical spirit. That’s the spirit that hopes for and looks for the worst. It gets malicious satisfaction in finding faults and blemishes. It tends to fix attention upon matters that are small and blow them out of proportion until they become matters of vital importance. That’s the situation Paul addresses in his letter to the Romans. People were pointing fingers at one another over what they were eating and drinking, wrecking havoc in the Body of Christ over trivial matters. Sadly, some things never change.

A third characteristic of this condemning, judgmental spirit is that it sticks its nose in where it doesn’t belong. It exposes itself in its readiness to give judgement when the matter at hand is not of direct concern. This, too, has caused no end of mischief in the church. Instead of letting an issue remain between the parties directly involved, other people stick their oar in, making it their business to have a say and pass judgment on what should or shouldn’t be done. Jesus says unequivocally, “stop it.”

A fourth manifestation of this judgmental, condemning spirit is that it puts personalities and prejudices in the place of principle. We are on dangerous ground here, because this is where we impute motives to others. We can’t understand why a person thinks or acts the way they do and so we begin to ascribe motive. But, of course, we cannot know another person’s heart—we have plenty of trouble really knowing our own. Only God knows the heart, so when we impute motive, we are acting in the place of God. I’m guessing you know that Jesus takes a pretty dim view of that.

A fifth characteristic of a condemning spirit is that judgment is rendered without full understanding of the circumstances. We are guilty of this when we habitually express our opinion without knowledge of all the facts. And, here’s the thing about that: how often can we truly know *all* the facts? At best, we usually

are privy to only part of the information that might help us understand a given situation or someone's actions or reactions. We are too limited, too fragmented in our knowledge to judge others.

John Stott was for 25 years the rector at All Souls Church in London, and he summed up the person with a judgmental, condemning spirit this way: He "is a fault-finder who is negative and destructive towards other people and enjoys actively seeking out their failings. He puts the worst possible construction on their motives, pours cold water on their schemes and is ungenerous towards their mistakes." Worse than that, he sets himself up as a critic, claiming the competence and the authority to sit in judgment upon another. "But if I do this, I am casting both myself and [the other] in the wrong role. The fall has made sinners of us all, so we are in no position to stand in judgment on our fellow sinners" since we cannot know each other's hearts or assess each other's motives.

It's no accident that Jesus links our propensity to judge with hypocrisy. It is just so easy and so deliciously tempting to confess other people's sins! And, it's so much less work than confronting and confessing our own. Yes, there are times when we must discern between good and evil, right and wrong. But, remembering our own fallenness and assessing honestly our own flaws and failures, when we do exercise godly discernment, we will do so with mercy. The law of love requires us to look for the best and to ascribe the best possible motives when we have no evidence to the contrary. But, God does not require us to call darkness light or evil good. Still, we make our discernments cautiously and carefully, never forgetting that we are ourselves so full of sin and so prone to error, that we must be on our guard lest we call light darkness and good evil, especially in ourselves. We are not to go about with our eyes closed or wink at sin when we see it. Yet, it is equally wrong for us to hunt for something to criticize and condemn and to seize upon every trifle and magnify molehills into mountains.

As he has throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is asking us to take a long, hard look in the mirror, to spend our time and energy judging ourselves rather than others. This kind of introspection will lead us to the humility and compassion necessary so that when we do need to lovingly confront a brother or sister, we will do so in the right spirit. We will have wrestled with the beam in our own eye and having experienced God's grace and forgiveness, we will surely not withhold it from another. Amen.