

Becoming...Sermon Series  
#3 – From Judgmental to Gracious  
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We continue our sermon series at the start of the new year looking at the kind of Christians we are becoming. This is a great time to make resolutions about losing weight or getting our lives together. I made a resolution not to shovel any snow in 2018. Already broke it. How about resolutions for our spiritual growth? Are we making progress on our journey of faith, or are we standing in one place? So far, we've looked at the move from an emphasis on believing to an emphasis on belonging, and at shifting our church's focus from maintaining the organization to organizing for service.

Today, we're looking at the move from being judgmental to being gracious. This is a tough one, because I can't imagine anyone would self-identify as judgmental. That's not a desirable quality these days, is it? "You should meet my friend, Kory. He's so judgmental!" And no one likes to feel judged, either. At my house, if I'm wearing something that isn't aesthetically pleasing, I'll hear, "Where did you get THAT?" To which I respond, "Geez, why so judge-y? This Members-Only jacket still fits!" No one likes to be on either side of judgmentalism.

And yet, that is a primary way our culture defines the church. In an extensive survey of non-Christians, the Barna group found that 87% of them said the church was judgmental. That was the second only to "anti-homosexual," which 91% of people said described the church. Interestingly, the third-highest descriptor was "hypocritical." If 87% of non-Christians think the church is judgmental, then almost nine out of ten non-church goers you meet assume you are judging them.

And, to be fair, you are. Judging other people is a part of our human nature. It's in our DNA to draw conclusions about a person based on what we know about them. And the more information we gain about them, the more we judge them. We form opinions on their looks, how they dress, their family, where they live, what they do for work. We can't not judge. The challenge is what we do with this information, how we keep our judging from turning into judgmentalism.

Here's a story I've told before but that's too funny not to repeat, and is supposedly true. An elderly lady was gambling in Las Vegas and hit it big on a slot machine. With a bucket overflowing with coins, she got on the elevator, realizing too late that there were two large black men on there with her, standing at the back of the elevator. She was incredibly nervous as the doors closed, waiting for the elevator to move. But it didn't move. And the longer she stood there, the more nervous she got. Finally, she heard a deep voice behind her say, "Hit the floor!" She threw the bucket up in the air, got down on her knees and screamed, "Please don't kill me!" There was a long pause, and then the voice said, "No ma'am, I mean you have to hit the button for a floor before the elevator will move." As the amused men helped her pick up her coins, she recognized them as former basketball players Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley.

We all judge, don't we? But there's a difference between judging and being judgmental. I'd articulate the difference as this: judging is drawing conclusions and forming opinions about someone based on the information you have. "That person is tall; I bet she is a basketball player." Being judgmental is drawing conclusions and forming opinions about someone that criticizes or condemns them. "That person is tall and black, I bet they are dangerous."

Where the church gets into trouble with this is in how it is perceived in dealing with behaviors we label “sins.” The church is notoriously famous for letting people know when they have crossed a line and sinned. For example, the church has long had a reputation for labeling activities like drinking, smoking, dancing, and watching movies as “sins,” because we all know the famous Bible passage where Jesus warns against evils of doing the foxtrot and binge-watching the “Lord of the Rings” trilogy. The church has a reputation for being judgmental, and every time some of our self-appointed religious spokespeople open their mouths on TV, that reputation is solidified.

Of course, we Christians don’t call it judgmentalism; we call it “telling the truth in love,” which we then use as a license to point out the sinful speck in the other person’s eye. A great example of this is the phrase, “Hate the sin, love the sinner,” which, by the way, is not in the Bible. It might sound like a harmless, grace-full statement on the surface, it really carries with it an air of judgment. It’s the ancient version of our modern-day “Bless his heart.” You can get away with saying the meanest, nastiest, most gossipy things about a person as long as you end it with, “God bless his heart.” “Did you hear about Johnny? That two-timing, Bible-stealing, no-good son of a biscuit eater lost his job again. God bless his heart.” Christians think spraying a little love on their judgment will make it smell better, but apparently 87% of non-Christians still smell the stink.

But wait! Isn’t condemning sinners a part of who we are called to be as Christians? The Bible is very clear that there are behaviors that are sinful, and if we don’t point them out to people, who will? The problem with that is we don’t have a standardized definition for what counts as a sin. As our society becomes more individualized, we’ve developed a kind of do-it-yourself morality. I’ll decide for myself what’s a sin, which means a sin is usually something someone else does that I don’t approve of. When we do that, we ourselves are committing the sin of pride, putting ourselves above someone else, but you don’t hear about people being excluded from the church for being too prideful

You might be surprised to know that Jesus did very little judging himself, but had a lot to say about judging others. Our passage today about the log in our eyes is a good one. So is the story where he says to a group of people ready to stone an adulteress woman, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” How do you hate the sin and love the sinner in that situation? “We love you, Gertrude, so just remember that as we’re hurtling these boulders at you.” Although Jesus was surrounded by sinners, he never judged them.

So, what did Jesus do with sinners? He ate with them. Partied with them. Spent time with them. He didn’t act like they were sinners. They weren’t a project or a mission field. They were his friends. People with names. Defined as beloved children of God, not defined by their sins. The only people he judges are those who think they’ve got all their stuff together. He judges the righteous for being self-righteous, for spewing hate speech about the speck in someone else’s eye while ignoring the log in their own.

So, what can we Christians learn from Jesus about how to exercise judgment? How do we overcome the earned stereotype that Christians are judg-y people and become something more gracious? It starts by acknowledging that we are all guilty of the sin of judgmentalism, and that our judgmentalism isn’t based on the Bible, but on our own desire to feel superior to someone. One of the ways we lift ourselves up is by putting someone else down, and when we do that, when our pride takes over, we are guilty of judging. We all have that relative, right? The one who can’t quite get their lives together, who gets spoken about in hushed tones at the family reunion, the one who makes everyone else’s life difficult. And, if we admit it, there’s a part of us

that feels good about ourselves because at least we're not like them. More often than not, our judgmentalism is not about helping the other person get better, but about making ourselves feel good.

And yet, by doing that, we're committing our own sin. Paul says it this way in Romans, addressing a group of people who were criticizing others for their behavior: "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things." So, the first part of becoming more gracious is recognizing and repenting of our own judgmentalism.

We also have to own our own sinfulness, even if we find our sins the more acceptable kind. We may not be really bad sinners like murderers or adulterers and people who don't use their turn signals, but, as Paul reminds us, we have all fallen short of God's glory. C.S. Lewis says it this way: "There's someone I love, although I don't approve of what he does. There is someone I accept, although some of his thoughts and actions are disappointing. There's someone I forgive, even though he hurts the people I love the most. That someone is me."

And for that reason, we deserve judgment. And we have gotten it, because our God is a judging God. That's one of God's primary roles. God called us to be God's people, to act a certain way, to live a certain way, and every single one of us has fallen short of that. So we have been judged. And we have been found innocent. Wait, what? What kind of "Law and Order" twist is this? Because of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, all of us have been found "not guilty" of the very sins that condemn us to punishment. Christ's death on the cross has set us free from that judgment, and replaced it with God's grace.

Why, then, is the church not known for its grace? Why aren't 87% of non-Christians saying the church is too gracious instead of too judgmental? Because too many Christians still believe that it's better to shame someone into having faith than love someone into having faith. Shaming them allows me to stand above them, but loving them requires me to get down in their mess with them, to eat with them, to party with them, to spend time with them. It's so much easier to shout at someone, "Stop doing that!" than it is to show them there's a better way, a way that we have found, a way that has changed our lives.

Will Rogers noted that before a Native American would criticize another person he would walk all the way around him. He would look carefully to see what the view was from that person's perspective before condemning him. I want you think about someone, or a group of people, whom you are most tempted to judge. It could be based on their looks, their lifestyles, their beliefs, their behaviors. Who is that for you? Now, what would it mean for you to walk all the way around them, to see things from their perspective?

Here's my resolution for 2018: I'm going to try and be known for being too gracious. Granted, I might bet to Heaven and God might say, "You know, Kory, in 2018 you loved people too much. You went too far. You should have been more judgmental." I guess I'll have to take that chance. Because this world is not going to be made better by exercising more judgment. But it could be made better by exercising more grace. Or maybe not. Maybe replacing judgment with grace will only help one other person accept the gift of Jesus Christ. But that would be enough, wouldn't it?