

Jesus Is Preaching Sermon Series  
Logs and Splinters – Matt. 7:1-5  
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Would you consider yourself to be judgmental? I don't know anyone who self-identifies that way. That's not a desirable quality, is it? "You should meet my friend, Kory. He's so judgmental!" And no one likes to feel judged, either. Sadly, having two daughters, I'm quite used to it. If I'm wearing something that isn't aesthetically pleasing to them, I'll hear, "Where did you get THAT?" To which I respond, "OK, Judgey McJudge-A-Lot! This satin track suit still kinda fits!" No one likes to be on either side of judgmentalism.

Not surprisingly, Jesus has something to say about that in the Sermon on the Mount, which is the focus of our current sermon series. Jesus warns us not to judge, or else we will face the same fate. You'd think because it was Jesus who said this, we would take heed and go out of our way not to be judgmental. 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. We have become better known for what we oppose than what we stand for. 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.

Think about people who have tattoos. If you see someone with an arm sleeve of tattoos, what conclusions do you draw about them? Often those thoughts arise involuntarily, almost like a knee-jerk reaction. We see someone with tattoos and we draw conclusions about them. Most people get tattoos for very personal reasons and the tattoos often carry an important significance. In fact, I've found that a lot of people with tattoos love to be asked about the meaning behind them. My old neighbor had a tattoo on his shoulder. I asked him what it meant, and he said, "It meant I got drunk one night and got this stupid tattoo." Ok, maybe not the best example of a tattoo story! I've found most tattoos have a more personal story behind them, but we often don't hear those stories because the judgments we make about the person keep us from asking them.

We all judge, don't we? But there's a difference between judging and being judgmental. I'd articulate the difference this way: judging is drawing conclusions and forming opinions about someone based on the information you have. "That person is tall, I bet he 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 moves into judgmentalism is in how it is perceived in dealing with behaviors that are labeled "sins." The church is notoriously famous for letting people know when they have crossed a line. 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. Many behaviors the church labels as "sins" come from our own judgment, not God's.

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-filled statement on the surface, but it really carries with it an air of judgment. This phrase is often applied to what is considered deviant behavior, but I've never heard anyone say, "I love her but I hate her greed" or "I love him but I hate his entitlement." Christians think spraying a little love on their judgment will make it smell better, but apparently 87% of non-Christians still smell the stink.

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 logs 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." 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 and the religious for putting the law above grace, 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 to redeem the other person, but about making ourselves feel better.

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, 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."

For those 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. There are consequences for disobedience, so we have to be judged. We have, 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 than to love them. 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 a lot easier to judge a single mom for her choices than to help her child with his homework or buy her groceries. It’s so much easier to shout at someone, “Stop doing that!” than it is to show them what God’s love and grace looks like in real life.

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 take the log out of your own eye and see things from their perspective?

Here’s my hope for us. I hope we can become known for being too gracious. Granted, we might bet to Heaven and God might say, “You know, the folks at Crestwood went too far. They loved people too much. Y’all should have been more judgmental.” I guess we’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.

Gandhi is quoted as saying, “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ.” So, let’s agree to hate who Jesus hates, which was...well, no one. And let’s agree to love who Jesus loved, which was...well, everyone. It’s not our job to judge, to condemn, to label. Let God do that heavy lifting as God sees fit. If you really want to judge someone’s sin, start with your own, the log in your eye. And then, once you’ve stopped sinning, you can start judging others. But until then, let’s love one another. After all, that is so like Christ.