

Pastor Chris Matthis
Lenten Midweek Series
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Wednesday, March 17th, 2021
Ascension Lutheran Church, Littleton, Colorado
Wednesday, March 24th, 2021

Sermon: The Sermon on the Mount: Judge Not

Text: Matthew 7:1-5

Focus: Jesus was unjustly condemned to death for our salvation.

Function: That they would show mercy and withhold judgment of others.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: “He will come again to judge the living and the dead” (Apostles’ Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matt. 7:1, ESV).¹ This teaching of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount has become something of a proverb in the English-speaking world. Amazingly, I most frequently hear it upon the lips of *non*-Christians, people who probably don’t know another Bible verse to save their life, but when you say something that rubs them the wrong way—perhaps against abortion or homosexuality or cohabitation—they are quick to retort, “Judge not, lest ye be judged!”

And yet in our overly-sensitive “woke” culture today, it seems that those who cry the loudest for the need of tolerance are quite often the *least* tolerant people. Political and theological liberals take offense at everything, even when no offense is intended or given. They seem to lie waiting to pounce upon you for some politically incorrect pronouncement so that they can judge you in the court of social media and hang you before all the facts become known.

But it would be hypocritical of us to say that only people on the Left are judgmental. People in the church can be quite judgmental as well. In fact, Jesus’ repeated use of the word

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

“brother” in Matthew 7:1-5 proves that he addresses these words to Christian disciples in particular and not just the world in general. It seems that in every Christian community there are those who are quick to criticize others without giving any significant thought to their own sins. The woman who is a gossip judges another person for dressing in sloppy clothes to church. The man who doesn’t contribute to the church’s offering criticizes the way in which church funds are used. The man with a raging porn addiction looks down upon another believer for letting the odd cussword slip in public. We are also quick to criticize traditions that seem old-fashioned to us, labeling them as “legalistic.” And we are quick to complain about changes and decisions we don’t like, regarding them as silly—or even sinful (when often they are merely adiaphora, so-called “indifferent” matters neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture).

But Jesus warns his disciples that we should *not* be hyper-critical or quick to judge others. “For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you” (Matt. 7:2). Christians should be loath to criticize their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. As Jeff Gibbs explains: “Jesus is forbidding his disciples to criticize or reject a fellow disciple while being blind to their own faults. That sort of arrogant superiority complex has no place in relationships between Jesus’ followers.”² For if we wrongly condemn a fellow disciple, we may find ourselves judged and condemned on the Last Day: “Judge not, that you be not judged” (7:1).

We must have the humility to recognize that our criticism may be misguided or misinformed. After all, “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes...” (Prov. 12:15). We do not know all the circumstances or temptations faced by another person. We cannot see all ends.

Pastor Dean Nadasdy offers this illustration:

² Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 367.

“Steven Covey (*Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*) told of riding on a New York subway one Sunday morning. People were sitting quietly until a man and his children entered the subway car. The man sat next to Covey, while the children ran wild through the car, yelling, throwing things and just plain misbehaving. Meanwhile the dad sat there next to Covey and did nothing.

“Judgments were made about the man’s neglectful parenting as he sat there in a trance, completely ignoring his children’s misbehavior.

“Finally, Covey broke the man’s trance with an appeal that he get control of his children. The dad responded with these unexpected words, ‘Oh, you’re right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don’t know what to think, and I guess they don’t know how to handle it either.’ Covey talks about how, in an instant, his attitude toward the dad was changed. He moved from judging criticism to compassion as he saw things as they really were.”³

Throughout Scripture God warns us against making hasty judgments of other people. According to Proverbs, “Good sense makes one *slow to anger*, and it is his glory to overlook an offense” (Prov. 19:11). The way of wisdom is to control your temper and your tongue and be *slow to anger*—an important aspect of God’s own character: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, *slow to anger*, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6). When we are patient and kind towards others, overlooking others’ misdeeds, we reflect the character of our heavenly Father and do so to our own glory. In St. Paul’s letter to the Colossians, he writes: “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved,

³ Dean Nadasdy, “Judge Not,” sermon in series *The Sermon on the Mount* (Fenton, Missouri: Creative Communications for the Parish), 123.

compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Col. 3:12-13).

None of this is to say that Christians should lack discernment or not exercise discretion. The paradox, of course, is that we must make judgments about right and wrong in order to lead a life pleasing to God. Every moment we face choices about whether to do A or B. So also we have to make judgments, or determinations, about the people we encounter in life. Will this person make a good mate? Which of these applicants should I hire? Is this person guilty or innocent? You see what I’m saying? It’s impossible in a civilized society *not* to judge. Even Christ himself says, “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment” (John 7:24). That’s the key: to judge with *right* judgment. “For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7).

Jesus doesn’t say that we must tolerate all human behavior, most of which is sinful and harmful to our relationships with God and other people. We’re not told to turn a blind eye to sin and just look the other way. Instead, we are told to get the *plank* out of our own eye before we try to remove the *speck* from our neighbor’s eye. In other words, consider your own sin and your own contribution to the situation before you attempt to help your neighbor with his or her problem.

When you put together what Jesus says in Matthew 7 and John 7, it’s not that different than what the Apostle Paul writes in Galatians 6: “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted” (Gal. 6:1). See! Jesus doesn’t want us to *ignore* other people’s sins. He wants us to *help* them. But that’s not the same as pouncing on them.

Matthis 5

But it's not helpful to be on the lookout for everybody else's sins so that you can catch them in the act and then publicly shame them for their sins. The phrase, "if anyone is caught in any transgression" refers to somebody stumbling suddenly and unexpectedly into their sin--like an animal ensnared by a trap. All of a sudden they're in a world of hurt because of what they've done wrong. They don't need us to point the finger, laugh at them, or judge them. They need us to help free them from the trap so they can be saved—"in a spirit of gentleness."

In fact, the only person we are told to keep an eye out for is ourselves. "Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted."

It's not our place to condemn another Christian. After all, "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). And yet the great irony of Holy Week is that the sinless One who said, "Judge not" and who came *not* to condemn but to save, was himself unjustly judged and condemned in order to accomplish our salvation.

The great irony of Holy Week is that Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, was judged in a kangaroo court by the Jewish religious leaders and found to be guilty of blasphemy. Then he was judged in a Roman court on the charge of sedition. But even the cynical Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, ruled that Jesus was innocent—"I find no guilt in him" (John 19:4). Nevertheless, Pilate still handed him over to be crucified, because political expediency mattered more to him than justice or the law.

So our Savior died on a cross between two criminals. The Son of God was condemned and executed like a criminal. The only Innocent ever to live died as a guilty man. Yet the ultimate judgment was not the sentence passed on him by the Jewish priests or Roman governor.

Matthis 6

The greatest judgment of all was that inflicted by God because of his righteous anger over sin—our sin, which Christ bore in his body in our stead.

Christ did not come into the world to condemn the world, but when he returns on the Last Day, he will judge the living and the dead. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor. 5:10). And do not forget: by the measure you judged others, so will you be judged (Matt. 7:2). Christ the King will pass sentence upon you: either mercy or justice, grace or condemnation. Which will it be? Remember the Beatitude: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matt. 5:7).

There’s an old bit of advice often given to Lutheran pastors by other pastors: When in doubt, err on the side of grace. Jesus *never* erred, but he still comes down on the side of grace. Thank God! Or none of us could stand. He was judged for us, so we do not need to judge each other. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.