

Without Judgment

Matthew 7:1-12 ~ December 3, 2016 ~ Heritage Lutheran

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

The warning against judgment is one of the most commonly misunderstood teachings of Jesus. Our failure to grasp the real sense of Jesus' counsel has been a constant source of friction in the Christian community. So our goal today will be to unpack how Jesus means us to understand what it means to live without judgment. We want to do this without getting caught in the trap of legalism. At the same time we want to understand how Jesus' instruction dovetails with the guidance and leading of the Holy Spirit through practical application.

So let's start with the question, "What does Jesus mean by judgment." In order to better understand, let's examine a little vignette about some middle school youth which may help us figure this out:

Sally and Joan are standing at their lockers before school when Stephanie arrives further down the hall. Joan nudges Sally and nods toward Stephanie saying, "Well, have you ever seen such a homely hair cut. Stephanie must have done it herself with a pair of kitchen shears."

"And she wears her pants too short," Sally chimed in, "you can almost see her ankle bones sticking out."

"I heard that she might be up for student body president." Joan responded. "I would never vote for such a fashion dweeb."

"Me neither," agreed Sally.

What is going on in this little story is what Jesus refers to as judgment. It is a negative assessment of another person. It is critical fault-finding in our neighbors. But the real problem is not just the negative assessment, but also the rationale behind it.

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount we have been dealing with matters of the heart. The prohibition against judgment is precisely the same thing. Probably Joan and Sally are envious of Stephanie or worse they may simply enjoy demeaning other people as a

way to feel better about themselves. Their hearts are bent on earthly treasures not the treasures that heaven values.

At first this only seems juvenile. But according to Jesus it is a serious problem. By passing judgment on Stephanie, Sally and Joan engage in behavior that rebounds on them. It will not be long until they will judge each other in the same way they judged Stephanie. Their critical fault-finding undermines their confidence in community altogether. In their minds they will begin to see the world as a place where everyone is secretly finding fault, jeering, and pointing at them behind their backs. How can they think otherwise when passing judgment has become such a casual and easy part of their nature? This is why Jesus teaches us not to judge others. Following the Holy Spirit will lead us away from critical fault-finding into a more positive regard for our neighbors, so that community may be strengthened.

Jesus consistently teaches us that God's plan is to create a loving and supportive community among his people. The guidance to avoid critical fault-finding and back-biting helps us as much as it does our neighbors. It results in a stronger environment where positive high regard for each other is the duty and work we all do in order to create a lasting heaven-like community. This cannot be coerced. Neither can it be a function of obedience to the law. Rather it needs to be inspired and empowered by God's Holy Spirit among us.

Now let's take up a new slant on this issue. A legalistic approach to this matter needs to be avoided because it gives enemies of the faith a real club to use on Christians. Jesus' warning against judging is subject to incredible abuse. Christians need to find their way through this or they can become quite confused about what Jesus is actually teaching. To look further at this we will examine another vignette from middle school.

Joan and Sally stopped on the way home to duck down an alley a few blocks from school. Sally had managed to take a couple of her father's cigarettes from home. She and Joan had agreed to try them out on the way home. Just as they were lighting up Stephanie came around the corner. She stopped and stared down the alley at what Joan and Sally were doing.

At first Joan and Sally were taken aback by being discovered that way. But then with a glance at each other they swaggered down the alley puffing

ostentatiously on their cigarettes. They came up to the stricken Stephanie and aimed puffs of smoke in her direction.

Joan said, "What's the matter with you, Stephanie, haven't you ever seen anyone smoke a cigarette before?"

"Ah, of course I have," Stephanie replied, "I just never thought I would see you two do it?"

"I thought you were a Christian, Stephanie," Sally said, "Christians aren't supposed to judge others, but here you are standing there passing judgment on us. What kind of Christian are you?"

So how would you answer Sally's question if you were Stephanie? Does following Jesus guidance about judgment mean that we can never form opinions about what is right and wrong? Does it mean that truth is only a matter of individual opinion?

Not at all. Jesus has some stern guidance about how this should play out in our lives. First he says:

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?

Jesus cares very much about what is right and wrong. But when it comes to making corrections the Holy Spirit is going to guide us to look first our own failings. This does not mean that right and wrong are relative; far from it. We know that God's good order applies equally to all. Jesus is just pointing out that each of us have our hands full dealing with our own engagement with the truth, without adding the responsibility of trying to straighten our neighbors out.

If we have the courage to ask, the Holy Spirit is always willing to show us the log in our own eye. But more than that, God's Spirit is delighted to help us work on removing that log in order to clear up our vision of the truth. In fact, this is the true purpose of judgment in our lives. It was never intended to convict us and then just leave us in misery. That is why this is a matter of the spirit and not the law. Making it law confuses us and opens us to debate and mutual judging with neighbors. Better to simply ask for God's guidance and then follow the Spirit's leading as best as we can. When we are talking about the log in our eye, God's leading will be pretty obvious for us.

But there is more to this than dealing with the log in our own eye. This is because neighbors are not always willing to let us passively tend to our own corrections. As we saw in our middle school scenario, Joan and Sally were not willing to let Stephanie's shocked look go without a confrontation. It is fairly common for neighbors to throw their struggles back in our face. Their guilt feelings are sometimes expressed in the assertion that we can't really be Christian if we are so judgmental. By this they mean if we dare to believe that truth is established by God. This is where Jesus helps us to understand that we need to be careful about who we actually engage in conversations meant to happen among Christians. Jesus puts it this way:

Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.

Jesus calls on us to use good judgment when deciding with whom to talk about matters of the kingdom. It is not a good witness to talk about the Kingdom to people who are actively opposed Christian conversation. In the case of our story, Stephanie needed to realize that rational conversation about what it means to be Christian was not going to happen with Joan and Sally. It would be better for her to walk away and trust God's spirit to prepare them to receive his word in his own time.

If we have faith in God's truth then we do not need to prove it at every opportunity. Rather we need to ask for discernment to know when people are ready for conversation that leads to greater faith. When there is antagonism against Christianity; when people are angry and belligerent; then they are more likely to act like wild dogs or pigs. They will reject the word because of their state of mind. We do not want to encourage the habit of rejecting the word in them, so following Jesus Spirit, we do better to avoid discussing matters of the kingdom with them before they are ready.

This is the heart of what it means to live without judgment. It means that we live each day in pursuit of God's guiding Spirit. We know that the direction the Spirit leads is toward community and genuine service to our neighbor. Trust God in this. He has chosen you for this kind of life. He has redeemed you by his own blood. He has put his truth in you to guide you. But his truth is not there to elevate you above others, but rather to enable you to better serve your neighbor. As a true child of God you are part of the family business. You are a true member of the kingdom of God. Today is the first day in eternity for you. Live without judgment, because above all you trust the

judgment of God and are willing to live your life guided each moment by the power of His Holy Spirit.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.