

"This Matter of Judging Others"

Do you find it easy to criticize others? I do! There is that side of me that finds it easy to point out somebody's faults and shortcomings. I hope I'm not only one like this!

Jesus talked about judging others. Jesus said, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged" (Luke 6:37). *Don't judge!* Now wait a minute! Is it always wrong to judge people? Aren't there times when we have to do make judgments about someone?

The word "judge" carries at least several different meanings. One is to "appraise or evaluate". Another meaning is to "condemn".

Judging people in the sense of evaluating them is a necessary part of life. Supervisors evaluate employees on their performance. Teachers grade students on their progress. If parents love their children, they will be setting rules and judging behaviors. Congregations judge the effectiveness of pastor and staff. Part of my job is making judgments about people in the church. Who are potential leaders? Is this person spiritually mature enough to take on a certain responsibility? Who are the dysfunctional people and how can they be handled? There were times when I had to recommend letting someone on the church staff go. It was painful, but necessary, if the church was to be healthy and grow.

Sometimes people say, "Who am I to judge?" or "That's being judgmental." Our culture is big on *tolerance*. It's almost a sacred value. We dare not label someone's behavior as wrong or evil, because we might be accused of being *intolerant*.

When Jesus says, "Don't judge", is He saying we shouldn't make moral or character judgments, or never discern whether something is right or wrong? I think there are times when it's important to make moral judgments about people. "I really think he's lying to me...". "She's been known to cause discord wherever she goes...we'd better be careful...". I once had to deal with a church leader who turned on me. We had worked closely together, then had a disagreement, and she got nasty. She began to undermine my ministry, and soon left the church. She went to another church where she wanted to take on a leadership role. That pastor talked to me about her and asked for my opinion on whether or not to allow her in a leadership position. I warned him to be careful, that she might well stab him in the back as she had done to me.

I don't think Jesus is saying we should naively pretend everybody's honest or has the best of motives, or that we should avoid reality and look at everyone through rose colored glasses. Jesus Himself was realistic about people and what they were like. He referred to Herod as "that fox". He called the scribes and Pharisees "hypocrites" and "blind fools". He said "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves" (Matthew 7:15).

I read about this church where one of the members was sleeping with his father's wife (presumably the guy's step-mother). No one in the church spoke out against this crude behavior! Finally, someone had the courage to judge this man and confront his awful behavior! Do you know what church that was? It was the church in Corinth, in the New Testament. The Apostle

Paul, who wrote about this in 1 Corinthians, chapter 5, was the one who judged the man. He kicked him out of the church in hopes that he would come to his senses and repent.

There's nothing wrong with being realistic and truthful about the character of others, calling bad behavior for what it is. In fact, in the passage in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul says we are to hold one another accountable *in the church*, but we aren't responsible for judging the behavior of those who are not part of the Christ community. "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons - not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard or robber. Do not even eat with such a one" (1 Corinthians 5:9-11).

Jesus says, "Do not judge". I think what Jesus is forbidding is not that fair appraisal and evaluation of others, but rather the *overly harsh criticizing and condemning of others*. He says, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not *condemn*, and you will not be condemned" (Luke 6:37). One Bible commentator suggests that Jesus is speaking against *self-righteous severity*" in our judgment of others, that *harshness* in judging, the *hasty condemning* of someone else. We all probably know some people who are always ragging on others...negative and complaining about this person or that person...always putting people down. Hopefully, you and I are not one of them!

There are some sound reasons why it's good to be cautious and reserved before we rush to judgment about anyone. For one thing, *we don't know all there is to know about someone*. A writer once told of situation that occurred early in his career. He says how when he was young and quite satisfied with himself, he spent one college vacation looking for what he called "local color" for a book he wanted to write. The main character was to be drawn from a poor, shiftless community, and he thought knew where to find it. "Sure enough, one day I came upon the place, made to order with its run-down farms, seedy men and washed out women." He noticed an unpainted shack, and by it was a scraggly-bearded old man in faded overalls. The guy was hoeing around a little patch of potatoes while *sitting in a chair*. The young writer tells how he wanted to hurry back to the place where he was staying so he could write about this lazy old guy, but as he heading back, he saw the man from another angle. Then he saw a pair of crutches leaning against the chair, and noticed the man was missing a leg. He confesses, "In that instant, the lazy, shiftless character I had seen was transformed into a figure of dauntless courage...since that hour I have never judged a man after only one look or conversation with him. And I thank God that I turned for a second look."

When I was in high school one day I went to the guidance counselor's office. As we were talking I noticed he had some difficulty holding his pencil. Once or twice it awkwardly slipped out of his hand. I thought was he drunk, and even joked about him with my friends. At some point I mentioned this incident to my dad, and discovered that dad knew him from childhood, and that my guidance counselor had some sort of disease which caused this problem. I just hadn't known.

We don't know all there is to know about a person. I don't know everything that each of you may be struggling with, and you really don't know all that goes on in my heart and life. Even people who are the meanest, most despicable and hard to like people, usually are acting out of some kind of inward pain that's never been healed.

We would be wise to be cautious in our judgments because we don't know all there is to know about someone.

Another reason we are smart not to quickly criticize and condemn others is that ***we can't be impartial or unbiased in our judgments of others.*** We always see others through the filter of our own experiences, prejudices, and expectations. For instance, is some of us see a guy with long hair and a pony tail or earring, that's going to skew what we think of that individual. Of if we see a woman with a lot of tattoos, or wearing a Bud Lite shirt, we might already have formed a preconceived notion of what kind of person this is. And for some, if they know we go to church, that will bias how they evaluate us.

There used to be a TV talk show hosted by a man named Joe Pine. This show was ahead of its time in that it was coarse and tasteless, like many of the talk shows today. Guests were often exposure hungry entertainers or people from fringe political or social organizations. Pine would confront guests in an abrasive, caustic way and try to make them look foolish. Some people claimed that Joe Pine's acid personality was driven by a leg amputation that had made him a bitter man. One evening a rock musician named Frank Zappa was a guest on the program. It was during the 1960's when very long hair on men was unusual or controversial. As soon as Zappa had been introduced and was seated, the following exchange occurred. Joe Pine said, "I guess your long hair makes you a girl." Frank Zappa shot back: "I guess your wooden leg makes you a table."

None of us can be completely objective and unbiased in our judgment of others. Only God can judge us fairly, with an unbiased view.

Also, it's good to be slow in criticizing someone because ***we're far from perfect ourselves.*** Perhaps you've seen this piece about how different we are in comparing "me" to "you". If someone is a saver and not a spender, if it's me I'm "thrifty", but if it's you you're a "tightwad". If I'm tailgating a car, the driver ahead of me is driving too slow, but if somebody's tailgating me he or she is a "raving maniac behind the wheel". If I dress in stylish clothes, I'm being "fashionable and neat", but if it's you, you're "just drawing attention to yourself" and "flaunting your money". If I'm sure of myself, I'm being "confident", but if it's you you're being "cocky", "egotistical". If one is opinionated, if it's me, I'm being "firm in my beliefs", but if it's you, you're being "bull-headed" and "stubborn".

Don't we have a way of easily noticing others' faults but being blind to our own? This is what Jesus is talking about! "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye', when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the

log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Luke 6:41-42). Jesus is being funny here! He paints a picture of a person with a telephone pole sticking out of his or her eye, criticizing someone else with a little speck of wood in theirs! Jesus says once we address our own faults and get the log out of our eye, we won't have nearly as much inclination to be picking at other peoples' shortcomings.

Henry War Beecher was a great preacher of the 19th century. One time when he had taken sides on a controversial issue, he received a letter that consisted of only one word: "Fool". The next Sunday, Beecher took the letter with him into the pulpit and said, "In my lifetime, I have received many letters from people who forgot to sign their names. This is the first time I have received a letter from a person who signed his name and forgot to write the letter."

We may call somebody a "fool", but chances are, if we look in the mirror, we might be looking at another one! There's that old poem: "There is so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, That it hardly behooves any of us, to talk about the rest of us." There is no room in a Christian's life for self-righteous judgment of others. We all stand judged before God, who alone is perfect. James 4:12 says, "There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?"

Jesus goes on to say that the attitude we show in judging others will come back to us. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Luke 6:37-38). The measure we give will be the measure we get back! If we're generous, merciful, forgiving in our judgments of others, people generally respond to us in a similar manner. If we make a habit of pointing out others' faults, the normal response is for them to hunt for things wrong with us. If we're picky, critical of others, we pollute the atmosphere and usually people don't want to be around somebody like that.

Jesus said, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned" (Luke 6:37). Appraising people and evaluating people is a part of life, and not necessarily bad. But the hasty put down, the overly harsh criticism, Jesus says: That's got to stop!

A couple of things we can do to correct this: When we are prone to point out what's bad about someone, think of what's good about that person and focus on that. And instead of putting someone down, why not say or do something to encourage that person and build them up!

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