



DEALING WITH A CRITICAL SPIRIT

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Matthew 7:1-6

20th Message

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The Scriptures present a very reasoned argument. They are not just a collection of sayings. In Bible study, it is wise to look for repeated themes and phrases. "Righteousness" is a word that Jesus repeatedly uses in the Sermon on the Mount. What it actually means is, to conform to a standard. In that sense, a watch that keeps the exact time could be said to be a "righteous" watch. Christian righteousness, according to Jesus, is conforming to a certain standard, and that standard is the character of God as it is revealed in the Scriptures.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day had a very wrong standard, however. The Pharisees were more concerned with outward conformity to the law than inner righteousness of spirit. The purpose of the Scriptures, according to Jesus, is to produce in us a love for other people. That is the mark of citizens of the kingdom of God. If we don't love people, then we don't understand the Scriptures, we have missed the entire point. Paul defines it this way in 1 Timothy: "The goal of our instruction is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." Bible study ought to make us more loving, not smarter or better able to discern what is going to happen next. It is not designed to get our theology correct, although theology is important. The purpose of all Bible study is to know God and become conformed to the image of his Son. As the hymn puts it, "beyond the sacred page we see you, Lord."

Some Christians, however, seem to try too hard to be good. They seem upright, but they're uptight. For them, goodness is a stern, demanding business. They're chaste, honest, respectable, Bible toting, church going, hymn singing people, but everything seems out of phase. As William James put it: "Their faith exists as a dull habit." They have the appearance of righteousness, with its self imposed worship, obvious humility, and harsh treatment of the body, but they lack genuine love that springs from having contact with God. True goodness is not found in doing extraordinary things, but in doing ordinary things in an extraordinary way. It is not so much outward religious behavior as it is having a gracious, winsome spirit in everything we do.

So we come to Jesus' words once more in the Sermon on the Mount. In the opening verses of Matthew chapter 7, he issues a warning. Verse 1:

"Do not judge lest you be judged. (Matt 7:1, NASB)

Don't criticize others, says Jesus, don't judge them. Don't impose your standard of righteousness on others. The standard is meant for us. If we are going to sit in judgment on anyone, we should do so with regard to ourselves. We must bring our own life into alignment with God's standard. It's not our job to shape people up. As C. S. Lewis put it: "There is really one difficult person in the world for whom you are responsible." Ruth Graham said of her husband: "It's my job to love Billy; it's God's job to make him good."

But we love to try and shape up others, don't we? Before you married your spouse you knew he or she had some weaknesses, some rough edges, but you thought that in time you could shape them up and get them house-trained. But you have discovered to your chagrin that they didn't cooperate. They don't appreciate your advice on how to run a business, how to make a budget or how to organize your sock drawer. Jesus says that is not where you begin or where your primary focus should be.

Now Jesus is not forbidding human institutions of justice or law courts. And he is not suggesting we suspend our critical faculties in relation to other people, pretending not to notice their faults, refraining from all criticism and refusing to discern between truth and error, goodness and evil. That would be hypocritical, and it would contradict much of his teaching in other places.

Jesus is not forbidding all criticism, either. We are still to be critics in the sense of being discerning. When Jesus tells us not to judge, he isn't referring to assessing people critically, but rather, judging them harshly. He is referring to our tendency to be fault-finders, to be negative and destructive towards other people, to enjoy actively seeking out their weaknesses, always assuming the worst about their motives, pouring cold water on their ideas and being ungenerous toward their mistakes.

There are two principles which will help us with our critical attitudes, with our condemning, censorious manner. The first is the principle of reciprocity. To put it simply, we get back what we give. That seems to be a principle that pertains to all of life, and that is what Jesus means when he says (verse 2):

"For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. (7:2)

Jesus is not referring to the time when we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. In the parallel passage in Luke 6, our Lord applies this principle to others, saying that in general, the way we treat people is how they will treat us. There are certainly exceptions to that, but the principle stands: if we are intolerable, judgmental and critical, then people will be inclined to treat us the same way; if we are tolerant and gracious, people will respond in kind.

After David sinned with Bathsheba, Nathan brought a case to him for judgment. The issue concerned a rich man with many sheep who stole the only ewe lamb of a poor man. David was very angry, and his judgment against the thief was harsh: "As the Lord lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die." Then Nathan said: "You are the man!" David's angry judgment blew up in his face. There is a deadly reciprocity awaiting us when we judge others, because our judgment inevitably comes home to visit us.

This often happens because we typically judge others in areas where we ourselves are weakest but we are in denial of that weakness. I find myself becoming very harsh at times with men who struggle with being over-controllers—which is one of my problems. This principle of reciprocity is one of God's ingenious ways of dealing with our double standards. We are hard on other people morally, but lenient on ourselves. We say our lies are only exaggerations to emphasize a point, but we are indignant and unforgiving when someone lies to us, and we call into question the integrity of every area of their life. But Jesus' warning is to be careful when we sit in the judge's chair, because we will actually find ourselves in the chair of the condemned.

One of the great ironies of life is that most people are critical because they lack a sense of worth. We want to be accepted and approved, so we criticize other people because that makes us feel better about ourselves. When I was a high school pastor, I had to take a student aside on occasion to tell him that his prayer request was inappropriate, because now, everyone had a lesser view of the person in question. Criticism is often cloaked in a helpful way, which is why Jesus calls it hypocrisy. An apparent act of kindness (taking a speck of dirt from someone's eye) becomes the means of inflating our own ego. This was what the Pharisees did, and Jesus addressed this kind of perversity in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. As A.B. Bruce writes, their ability to exalt themselves by disparaging others was "a cheap way of attaining moral superiority."

But it always backfires, because people don't appreciate it. We find that we are less accepted and less liked—and people tend to be more critical of us, so we start feeling worse about ourselves. Jesus says, do not start by applying truth to everyone else's life, because it backfires, and we are the ones who suffer the most.

In the parable, the Pharisee made a detestable and in-

accurate comparison, magnifying both his own virtue and the tax collector's wickedness. When we act this way we set ourselves up as an examiner, a judge, claiming competence to sit in judgment upon our fellow men. But there is only One who is competent for that job, and we are not him, we are not God. No human being is qualified to be the judge of his fellow humans, for we cannot read each other's hearts or assess each other's motives.

When we judge someone, we are playing God. In order to judge justly, we would need to know everything about the person, not only their external circumstances but also their inner thoughts and motives, and that is impossible. We cannot be sure of our own motives; how can we presume to judge someone else's?

So the command not to judge is, as John Stott writes, "not an order to be blind, but a plea to be generous. Jesus is not saying we should cease to be men (by suspending our critical powers, which help to distinguish us from animals), but to renounce the presumptuous ambition to be God (by setting ourselves up as judges)."

The Bible does speak of an act of judgment that is redemptive and should be carried out. Paul says in Galatians: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." That isn't a judgment that condemns, but rather a word that is designed to save. It's a rescue operation. If we see a believer violating a clear command of Scripture, we should reach out to help him in a spirit of love and humility. That's love in action. Redemptive judgment is based on actions, not motives, and violation of Scripture, not merely conscience; it is designed to restore and rebuild someone in an atmosphere of acceptance and empathy. What a far cry this is from the critical, faultfinding attitude that Jesus is addressing.

However, before that happens, Jesus says there is another important principle to remember, the principle of priority. The Scriptures are to be applied, but God wants us to begin with ourselves. Our Lord makes use of a helpful and familiar illustration. This is a figure of speech, hyperbole, an exaggeration for the sake of emphasis. Verse 3:

"And why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is 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 brother's eye. (7:3-5)

Here Jesus relates his famous little parable about "foreign bodies" in people's eyes, specks of sawdust on the one hand and logs or beams on the other. (James Moffatt refers to these as the "splinter" and the

“plank.”) Earlier, Jesus had exposed hypocrisy in relation to God (practicing piety before men to be seen by them); now he exposes hypocrisy in relation to others, namely, meddling with their petty mistakes while failing to deal with our own major faults.

Jesus asks how we can see the speck in our brother’s eye when we have a log sticking out of our own? Imagine how silly this scene would be—trying to help someone remove a speck from his eye, with a piece of two by four projecting from our own eye! We might be trying to help, but it would be quite evident that we needed help ourselves. How ludicrous! This is the point Jesus is making. The picture of someone struggling in the delicate operation of removing a speck of dirt from a friend’s eye while a plank in his own eye entirely obscures his vision, is ridiculous in the extreme.

The point is clear. We have a fatal tendency to exaggerate the faults of others and minimize the seriousness of our own. We have a rosy view of ourselves and a jaundiced view of others. Indeed, what we are often doing is seeing our own faults in others and judging them vicariously. When we do this we experience the pleasure of self-righteousness without the pain of penitence.

Jesus gives the cure for this, in verse 5:

“You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye. (7:5)

Some people would conclude from this parable that Jesus was telling us to mind our own business. But he is saying that if we deal with our own eye problems, then we will be able to see clearly enough to help someone else. It might be a good idea to highlight in your Bible that word “first”: “first take the log out of your own eye . . .” If we did this in our homes, if we first took the log out of our own eye rather than pointing out over and over again the problems we see in our spouses, that would work wonders for our communication.

Jesus’ standard for relationships in his kingdom is high and healthy. As John Stott writes: “In all our attitudes and behavior towards others we are to play neither the judge (becoming harsh, censorious and condemning), nor the hypocrite (blaming others while excusing ourselves), but the brother, caring for others so much that we first blame and correct ourselves and then seek to be constructive in the help we give them.”

We need to be as critical of ourselves as we often are of others, and as generous to others as we always are to ourselves.

There is a balance to this, however. Verse 6:

“Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces. (7:6)

If we are not to be judges, neither are we to be naive and simple. Not everyone is grateful for criticism and correction. According to the book of Proverbs, this is one of the obvious distinctions between a wise man and a fool: “Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you.” The dogs referred to here are not like the pets we own, but rather the wild pariah dogs, the mongrels which scavenged in the city’s rubbish dumps. And pigs were unclean animals to the Jew.

Jesus recognizes that we do have to make judgments. We are to be critical, analytical and thoughtful in our dealings with others. Our Lord doesn’t want us to be naive. On another occasion he said we are to be “wise as serpents.” So when he tells us not to judge, he is not encouraging us to be naive and unthinking. We have to make judgments.

But there are some people who are beyond our help. We may want to lovingly and gently take the speck out of their eye, but they don’t want it out. They don’t want help. They don’t want truth. What they want is to live under the cover of darkness. That is why Jesus says do not take the precious things of God, like pearls, and throw them to an animal which will trample them under foot. Behind our Lord’s words is the intimation that truth unheeded tends to brutalize people. God withdraws light from those who don’t want it, because truth unheeded tends to make people more inhumane, more animalistic, more brutal. Therefore, as an act of love, Christians should not force people to face the truth when they don’t want it. Jesus is saying that if we attempt to take the speck out of someone’s eye, and they indicate a disrespect for spiritual things, a disregard for holy things, we should not force the matter. He is not talking about non-Christians in general, but those who spurn truth, those who have no use for it and ridicule it.

I would like to close by sharing the true story about a young man named Teddy Stallard. Teddy by his own admission was an unattractive, unmotivated little boy. He was difficult to like, especially for a school teacher who all day long faced his deadpan, expressionless, unfocused stare. Although his fifth grade teacher said she loved all her students, Miss Thompson had to admit that deep down she wasn’t being honest. She didn’t like Teddy. She judged him. She even received a certain perverse pleasure in marking his papers with red ink and writing the F’s with a flair. Her view of him was already distorted by her perspective, but she should have known better. As his teacher, she had his records, and she knew more about him than she wanted to admit:

First Grade: Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude, but he has a poor home situation.

Second Grade: Teddy could do better. Mother is seriously ill. He receives little help at home.

Third Grade: Teddy is a good boy, but too serious.

He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.

Fourth Grade: Teddy is very slow, but well behaved. His father shows no interest.

At Christmas, Miss Thompson's class all brought her presents in pretty wrappings, and gathered round to watch her open them. She was surprised when she received a gift from Teddy. It was crudely wrapped in brown paper, loosely held together with tape. When she opened it, out fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet with half the stones missing, and a bottle of cheap perfume. The children began to giggle, but she had enough sense to put on the bracelet and apply some of the perfume on her wrist. She asked the class, "Doesn't it smell lovely?"

When school was over and the children had left, Teddy lingered behind. He slowly came over to her desk and said softly, "Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother. And her bracelet looks real pretty on you, too. I'm glad you liked my presents." When Teddy left, Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked God to forgive her.

The next day when the children came to school, they were welcomed by a new teacher. Miss Thompson had become a new person. She was no longer a judgmental teacher. The log in her eye was gone. Now she had clear vision, and she could see. Oh! how she could see! She could see real needs beneath those outward actions, and ways she could help remove specks. She was now a person committed to loving her children and doing things for them that would live on after her. By the end of that

school year, Teddy showed dramatic improvement and had caught up with most of the students.

She did not hear from Teddy for a long time. Then one day she received a note that said:

Dear Miss Thompson: I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class. Love, Teddy Stallard.

Four years later, she received another note:

Dear Miss Thompson: They just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I liked it. Love, Teddy Stallard.

Finally, she received another note:

Dear Miss Thompson: As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month, the 27th to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now; Dad died last year. Love, Teddy Stallard.

Miss Thompson went to that wedding. She deserved to sit where his mother would have sat; she had earned that right. She had done something for Teddy that changed his life forever.

That is my prayer for our body, that we would become a people who stop leaping to judge and begin looking to heal.

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