

Judgmentalism Replaced by Merciful Concern

Matt. 7:7-12

Intro. One summer when I was still a PE major at the King's College, I needed a job. My mobility was limited because of an athletic injury that required knee surgery. So I found one driving an ice cream truck for Carnival Bar. In those days, the ice cream trucks that cruise the neighborhoods weren't yet equipped with some monotonous electronic melody. Drivers had to pull a string attached to bells. The ringing of those bells still haunts me today! But one day soon after I took the job, some kids waved me down and I pulled to the side of the road. But as I did, I had the misfortune of swiping the front fender of a big Mercury. I phoned Mr. Cardane, the somewhat intimidating fleet manager and reported the accident. He told me what to do and of course, to be more careful. Now I would not exaggerate this point...but not more than 30 minutes later, I put out both headlights of a Rambler sedan while backing into a parking spot. Do you begin to know how hard it was to find a payphone and call Mr. Cardane a second time? "Hello, Mr. Cardane, this is Stewart on truck 17." "Yes, we spoke a few moments ago." Do you understand how hard it was for him to believe I was telling him I was involved in a second accident?...and this one was more serious than the first! I was in serious need of mercy. And by some small miracle of God, I wasn't fired. Mr. Cardane was kind and understanding. Yet in all honesty, there have been numerous occasions when I haven't been as merciful as that fleet manager was to me. But mercy is precisely what every sinner needs. Amen?

We come this AM to a critical passage. In **vs.1-6** Jesus forbids merciless judging, but reminds us of our need to practice discernment. Now as we come to **vs. 7-12** Jesus explains how we can exchange the critical spirit forbidden in **vs.1-6** for wisdom and a heart of mercy. I say this passage is critical because it defines the attitude we must have toward people God wants us to reach out to.

Let's start by reviewing **vs.1-6**. In **vs.1, 2** Jesus said, "**Do not judge, or you too will be judged.**" Here Jesus forbids the critical condemning kind of judgmentalism that was so common among Israel's religious elite. The Pharisees and law teachers lived by an external form of righteousness based on rule-keeping. They felt their performance earned God's acceptance and blessing. But Jesus called them arrogant hypocrites. Instead of approaching God with humility and brokenness, they maintained a high opinion of themselves by judging or comparing their piety with that of others around them. Paul addressed this in **II Cor. 10:12** – **We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.** Not only did these men look down on everybody outside their holy club...but they not doubt were critical of each other too. This is what legalism does. Pride and self righteousness are fueled by the very attitude Jesus forbids...the "one ups-man-ship" of judgmentalism.

So this section of **Matt. 7** urges us to think seriously about how we view other people. How do we view unsaved neighbors with all their nasty habits? How do we view our brothers and sisters in the Church? How do we view those who hold a different opinion about non-essential matters? How do we view those who messed up? Do we presume to have all the facts? Do we feel the sinner with his nasty habits and baggage is too far gone? Is our attitude toward the merciful or critical? Do we push others away or draw them in.

As we survey the NT, the command **do not judge** is repeated in **Rom.14** and in **Jas.2**. It would seem that judgmentalism was a big problem for God's people because the NT addresses it so often. Yet 20 centuries later I think we have to admit that judgmentalism is still alive and well. Above all nations on earth, Israel was uniquely blessed by God. The same is true for us. Yet the blessings they received generated feelings of superiority. Instead of reaching out, they became isolationist. They despised their nasty neighbors and looked down on them. Could this happen to the Church?

In **vs.2** Jesus said a critical, merciless spirit often has a boomerang effect. Those who judge others will be judged the same way. In the 5th Beatitude of **5:7**, the same metric applies to mercy. Yet in **vs.3, 4** it's important to note that Jesus didn't forbid His followers from removing specks. "Speck removing" is an essential part of living in the light and sharing God's truth. Jesus died to remove sin. Yet sin is a very unpopular topic to talk about. Sinners react to those who live in the light and speak the truth about sin. It's unavoidable. Jesus prepared us for that reaction in **Jn. 3:20, Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.** Light exposes specks just as effectively as it exposes beams. The proper sort of judging happens when we agree with God and live according to the judgments He has already made and revealed in His Word. Whether we're talking about who God is / the way of salvation / or some moral issue...the fact is...God has already spoken and expressed His judgment.

But the unsaved are often disturbed by our dogmatism. They accuse Christians of being judgmental because we insist God's Word is true. But we're never judging in an improper way when we stand where God stands. We just need to make sure we aren't obnoxious or brutal about it. We're called to speak the truth with mercy and love. We must never talk down to people! So **vs.3-5** informs us that speck-removing, or correcting someone in sin or error, is a very precise and delicate business. It must not be undertaken by someone whose vision is blinded by a beam of hypocrisy. **Rom. 2:1, 2** echoes this... **You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.**

A year after his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the arranged murder of her husband, Uriah, God sent Nathan to David. I'm sure Nathan had to muster up all the courage he could find to remove such a large splinter from the eye of his king. Yet God spoke through his prophet and David finally confessed. Listen to his prayer... **Ps. 51:9-13 - Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me...Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you.** David knew he was in no shape to preach righteousness to others until he was clean and forgiven himself. The spiritual dimension of his kingship had been negated by his own sin. As long as his sin went unconfessed, he had a beam in his eye and was in no shape to remove specks from the eyes of people he served. He was in the same condition as the Pharisees who were blinded by their own sin and self-righteousness.

So the lesson seems clear. By its very nature, Gospel truth exposes flaws and failures. While facing the truth is never popular...nobody trusts Christ to save them who doesn't first realize their failures and face their need of the Savior. But pointing out sin is delicate business. Before we engage in a sin-removing ministry to others, it's necessary for us to do what David did. In **Psa.139:23, 24** he prayed, **Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.** We must ask God show us the beam in our own eye and ask Him by His grace to remove it.

Then as we found last time, **v.6** is challenging. **"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 then turn and tear you to pieces."** Here Jesus provides an example of how discernment is a legitimate form of judging. **Dogs** and **pigs** are people who are actively hostile to the things of God. They've heard the truth and decided to reject and oppose it. Today Christians in Iraq are hunted down and forced to renounce their faith by radical Islamists. The Gospel to the Islamist is like a sacred thing to a **dog** or pearls to a **pig**. So here's a case where discernment is needed. We must not agitate or provoke hostiles like this by tossing gems of truth at them. Sacred things have no appeal to them. The wiser course is to keep your distance or they may turn on you.

That's why Jesus avoided Jerusalem until God's appointed time and why many in the early Church were forced to flee Jerusalem. But identifying who these men are requires discernment.

You see, 99% of the people we encounter each day aren't wild or vicious Christ-haters. They're not **dogs** or **pigs**. They're lost sheep just like we were before we trusted Christ. We must learn to see the crowd as God sees them. We must have compassion on them because they're in great danger and don't even realise it. **Isa. 53:6** says, **We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.** How did Jesus respond to the woman at Samaria's well? Who is the hero in the Parable of the Good Samaritan and why? How did Jesus respond to the woman who was caught in the act of adultery? In each situation, mercy triumphed over judgment. This is what **Isa. 53:6** declares. In mercy, God held back the punishment we deserved. Instead of condemning us, He **laid on Him (Jesus) the iniquity of us all.** In mercy, God made a way to save us through the sacrifice of His Son. So this matter of judging others must be seen in the light of God's mercy to us. The mercy we received must be extended to others in the same measure. We all know **Jn. 3:16**, but less familiar is **Jn. 3:17 - For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.** Kingdom people have the same attitude and objective their king has. To follow Jesus means to practice merciful compassion and pray for the salvation of those we meet.

Now that's a long introduction and review, but I felt it was necessary. If **vs.1-6** address our natural tendency to be judgmental...**vs.7-12** address the supernatural resource available to overcome it. (Repeat) **vs.7-12** presents the new paradigm kingdom people must live by. Our king wants to replace the spirit of criticism with merciful concern. This involves a total exchange only He can accomplish.

The fact that **vs.1-11** belong together is solidified by **v.12 - So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.** The adverb **So** or **therefore** (KJV) applies to **vs.1-11**. It relates to and sums up the previous section. **v.12** is commonly called the "golden rule." The fact is, none of us want to be misjudged / judged unfairly / or condemned mercilessly! None of us want to be written off because we messed up. None of us want to be looked down on or despised because we don't measure up. We all want to be loved, accepted and given the benefit of the doubt. We all plead for mercy when we've failed. **So in everything (v.12 says) do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.** That last phrase is intriguing...**this** (principle) **sums up the Law and the Prophets.** Just like the law of love, the entire OT can be summarized in this single command. Yet in their legalistic judgmentalism, Israel's leaders missed the point of the law and had it all wrong!

I hope that review helps. Christ's teachings are both systematic and strategic. Incorrect interpretations emerge when we isolate individual teachings from their context. So let's consider **vs.7-12** in light of the verses that come before. So as we've seen, **vs.1-6** address the right and the wrong kind of judging. Yet how can we live and speak God's truth without appearing to stand over people like a judge? How can we accomplish the delicate and precise task of removing specks without appearing critical and self-righteous? How can we discern the difference between the undecided and those who are actively hostile and dangerous? What enablement is available to help us walk this tightrope? And we do walk a tightrope, don't we? We can fall off one side by saying nothing and we can fall off the other side by saying too much. So I'm glad we asked...**vs.7-12** supplies the answers.

1. God's provision enables us – vs.7, 8 - "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

I think judging others is as natural as burping after a gulp of Vernors. Am I right about that?

We look at a ragged bum begging change from motorists and we know his story...or we think we do. We're convinced the playboy at our workplace is a lousy candidate for the Gospel. Someone tells us a certain Christian we know drinks wine occasionally...as a prayer-request of course. We're certain they are carnal / backslidden / and perhaps unsaved. We make judgments about people and things they do all the time. We size people up and think we've got them all figured out. What we think we know moves us closer to some and farther away from others. So judging others is all very natural and common. But the ministry kingdom people have to a lost world is supernatural. It's a ministry only God can accomplish by the resources He provides. So **v.7** reveals a strategy...**Ask**. Ask who? Ask God. It seems so simple we might overlook it. Ask. What we learn here is that prayer is the key to remove judgmentalism that writes people off and the key to obtain mercy that draws them in.

To accomplish the task Christ has entrusted to us, our first and most basic need is to pray that God will produce in us a heart of mercy and compassion. We must ask for this because it isn't something that comes naturally or automatically. Love is a fruit of God's Spirit...it's something only God can produce. A heart of mercy that views others with acceptance and charity must replace this natural inclination we have to be critical. God's love enables us to see lost people as He sees them. His love in us is then expressed by prayerful concern for their eternal welfare. The love that provided salvation must become the driving force in our lives. In **Jn. 13:35**, Jesus said love would distinguish His followers. In **II Cor. 5:14, 15** Paul declared the single reality that motivated him to tirelessly preach the Gospel despite harsh criticism and fierce opposition. He wrote, **For Christ's love compels us...** Note that...Christ's love. It's not possible to truly love and be harshly critical at the same time just as it isn't possible to hate those for whom we're praying. So who and what are you praying for?

But to walk this tightrope of speck removing, we must also ask God for wisdom. Solomon was the wisest human being who ever lived. The discernment he applied to settling disputes was legendary. So where did Solomon's wisdom come from? What made him so wise? Answer...He asked God for wisdom. **I Kings 4:29, 30** explains how God answered his request. **God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt.** God gave Solomon exactly what he asked for. And listen...Solomon's God is our God. Through the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, God has made His wisdom available to us...wisdom the unsaved world knows nothing about. Writing to the first century believers at a time of severe testing, **Jas. 1:5** says, **If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.**

So we must ask God for mercy and love to overcome our tendency to judge and condemn others. But we should also ask God for wisdom to distinguish improper judging from discernment. We must seek God's mercy and wisdom to speak the truth and remove specks. The efforts of the Christian who lacks mercy, love, and wisdom from God are reminiscent of the damage a bull might cause in a china shop. Evangelistic effort that lacks the enablement of the Holy Spirit is ineffective and in many cases, counterproductive. The unsaved are turned off instead of turned on. Jude says there are situations when the "in your face," "turn or burn message" is necessary. Some must be snatched from the flames. But the average person responds more favorably to those who respect their opinions and give them space. I'm sure eternity will reveal that more people are won by those for whom zeal was turned to prayer and condemnation to heartfelt concern. More were won by those who spoke as God's Spirit prompted them, than by those who busted down the doors with guns blazing.

Before we leave **vs.7, 8** let me say that **ask, seek, and knock** are present imperatives. This tense of the verb insists that our prayers must be continual and persistent. We must continue asking, continue seeking and continue knocking. Prayer is essential for every phase of our Christian life. Beyond asking, we must seek. Beyond seeking, we must knock. We must never give up.

Instead of persisting in judgmentalism or fruitless evangelism, we must pour our efforts into prayer. We must pray not only for the salvation of lost sheep, but also for those who hate Christ and actively oppose the Gospel. We must not forget **5:44** where Jesus said, **Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.** The fact is...some people are so nasty and hostile we can only love them from a distance. It isn't necessary to be best "buds" with somebody to love them. But we must pray for all who are lost because only God can change hearts. We need to understand that merciful concern isn't a slight course adjustment. It's a 180 degree turn from a critical spirit. It's a total exchange only God can create in us as we ask Him to do it.

2. God's paternity encourages us – vs.9-11 - "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

In commenting on **vs.7, 8** I didn't mention the promises. To those who ask, Jesus promised, **it will be given** / to those who seek Jesus promised, **you will find** / and to those who knock Jesus promised **the door will be opened to you.** The health and wealth crowd is obsessed with these promises. They believe these verses authorize their "name it / claim it" theology. (or "lip it, grip it") Their concept of God seems more like the genie in the lamp or a slot machine than the God of the Bible. They think God exists to deliver everything their hearts desire...a better paying job / a bigger house / a nicer car...healing for my arthritis / and a makeover for a spouse. Now God has power to do any and all of these things. But none of these are the focal point of the prayer Jesus was talking about here. The asking of **vs.7-11** is focused on replacing our critical spirit with a heart of wisdom, mercy and compassion. The focus isn't self-serving or self-gratifying...the focus is on changing and enabling you and me so we can effectively be used to reach others. The NT addresses ineffective, failed, and self-serving kind of prayer in **Jas.4:3 - When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.**

But when we are in sync with Jesus Christ and His purposes and desires, prayers are sure to be answered. This is His promise. So the "**good gifts**" of **vs.11** have nothing to do with health or wealth. The value and source of physical and material things has already been spelled out in **chap. 6.** In fact, **6:33** turns our focus away from "these things" to Christ's kingdom and righteousness. To understand what these **good gifts** are, we need to compare **Lk.11:13 - If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"** The wording of Matthew and Luke is identical except that Luke has **Holy Spirit** where Matthew has **good gifts.** Did one Gospel writer hear correctly and the other incorrectly? No. The Holy Spirit cause both men to hear what Jesus meant. What God promises to give those who ask are the good gifts of His Holy Spirit ...gifts like wisdom, mercy, and love. God is eager to give these gifts because they fulfill His desire and purposes. His desire is to make us holy so we shine like lights in a dark place. His will is to make us effective like salt that adds flavor to mashed potatoes. These are the gifts for which we should ask, seek and knock until God produces them in us.

But notice the paternal or fatherly aspect of **vs.9-11.** In **v.9** and **10** Jesus turned to the fathers in the crowd. He says, "You're a good dad aren't you? How about you and you over there? I'm sure you all love your kids and want to give them whatever they ask for (within reason of course). So which of you gives his son a rock when he asks for a piece of bread? And which of you gives his son a snake when he asks for a fish? I'm not seeing any hands. A rock may look like a loaf of bread but it's useless to a hungry boy. And instead of your son biting into a nice broiled fish, a snake might be the one to do the biting! So when your boys ask for something, I'm sure none of you respond by giving them something useless or harmful. Am I right about that?"

Jesus then made his point in **v.11 - If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!** Despite the fact we are fallen, sinful men, we love our kids and want to give them what they need and ask for. Sometimes we give them more than they should have. And at other times we give them things they shouldn't have. Our nature is fallen and evil. We do the best we can, but unlike God, our knowledge is limited. Since we know how to give good gifts to our kids as imperfect parents, **how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!**

Here Jesus assures us our Father in Heaven is the perfect provider. The perfect paternity of God assures us He will give what we ask when we ask according to His will and His purposes. We can be sure prayers like this will be answered. **I Jn. 5:14, 15 - This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us--whatever we ask--we know that we have what we asked of him.**

3. God's purpose exhorts us – v. 12 - So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

I'm sure you recognize this verse. It's what is traditionally referred to as the "golden rule." In this principle that sums up OT teaching, Jesus has expressed what it means **to love your neighbor as you love yourself**. That second great command can be a bit abstract and lofty. Love can such a broad a term that we never really get our arms around it. But **do to others what you would have them do to you** brings it down to earth. Don't you agree? Question...How do I love my neighbor as I love myself?... Answer: By treating him/her the way I want to be treated...by doing for them what I would want someone to do for me.

When this summary principle is applied to the previous verses, the dots come together. How do I want others to treat me with regard to my sinfulness and obvious flaws? Do I prefer to be harshly criticized and smugly condemned?...or would I rather be treated with consideration in a spirit of mercy and love? Would I prefer to be encouraged or discouraged?...written off or included?...accepted or pushed away? Do I thrive when I'm built up or torn down? Do I really want my sins to be overlooked or excused...sins that degrade, defile, and marginalize my effectiveness?...or would it be better for me to be lovingly confronted and corrected?

Suppose I was a person who heard the Gospel and decided I want no part of it? Would I hope that once I'd made my disinterest known, my feelings and decisions would be respected? Or would I want the same points raised over and over again until my only recourse was to avoid contact with the Christian who is so determined to convert me? Would I want to argue the same points over and over until our friendship is damaged, or would I prefer my friend pray for me instead of pester me?

This section of **chap. 7** begins by asking us to consider how we view other people. The section then ends by instructing us to be to others what we would want them to be to us...not critics...but a friends / not wagging fingers...but open arms / not people who write us off...but people who invite us in / not hypocrites but those who speak the truth in the love we practice. The only way judgmentalism can be overcome and replaced by mercy is by asking...by asking God to give us His mercy, His compassion, and His wisdom. Will you join me in doing that? Like that poor college student who drove the ice cream truck like it was a bumper car...the people we come in contact with need mercy not judgment. How will they believe in a merciful Savior they've never seen, if they don't see His mercy in us?