

The Way We Live: An Exploration of The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 7:1-6

I'm curious...while we've been going through the Sermon on the Mount, how much of it is familiar to you? (I suspect much of it.) But, how much of it did you realize was all part of one and the same sermon? It is important to remember that the Sermon holds together as a unified whole. Unfortunately much Bible teaching tends to break it up into smaller pieces and we miss some of the flow, progression, and overall thought of the Sermon in the process. (Which is why I encourage us to see all the parts connected, even though we're looking at smaller sections each week.)

I'm also curious how you've been confronted, or challenged by the Sermon? Or what new perspectives have you gained? What invitations are you sensing? I hope this is the kind of stuff that is coming out and being processed together in Table Groups.

I suspect this week's passage (7:1-6) is familiar to many...even if it's something we all struggle with (I know I do). It is important to see how this section on not judging connects with having a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law (5:20). They were experts at judging others, and influenced the moral and cultural climate in such a way as to make giving and receiving judgment normal.

As N.T. Wright explains, regarding this week's passage, "*We rightly guess that [Jesus] had a particular target in mind...the scribes and Pharisees. Though we know from history, and from the New Testament itself, that there were many scribes and Pharisees who were genuinely and humbly pious people, the tendency of hard-line pressure groups—which is what the Pharisees basically were—is always to create a moral climate in which everybody looks at everybody else to see if they are keeping their standards up.*" In this Sermon Jesus is saying there is another way, a better way, of being human.

Additionally, it's important to connect the idea of not judging to our calling to be salt and light. We don't do a great job of being distinct (salt) or engaged (light) by having the same judgemental posture as the world around us. Perhaps most importantly, we need to understand and appreciate how we first must cultivate and apply earlier points of the Sermon if we are to have any hope of making progress toward being/becoming people who don't judge.

As we approach this section, as Dallas Willard reminds us, "*We must start at the point Jesus Himself chose—the nature of true well-being, or 'blessedness'—and follow His order through the setting aside of anger, contempt, absorbing lust, manipulation, and payback, and on to the forsaking of dependence upon human reputation and material wealth. Then we will be ready for what comes next. For as the Master of knowledge, He here deals with personal and moral reality as it really is, and it really does have an order. We omit that order at our peril.*" So, if you're like me, and struggle with not judging others, then in all likelihood, we need to continue working on some of the stuff mentioned earlier in the Sermon.

(Don't be discouraged...spiritual formation is a lifelong process. Just be intentional. This is the whole reason we're going through the Sermon on the Mount together.)

In the opening section of Matthew 7, as Willard puts it, Jesus now "...deals with the deadly way in which we try to 'manage' or control those closest to us by blaming and condemning them and by forcing upon them our 'wonderful solutions' for their problems."

Before we jump in too far I think it might be helpful to understand what Jesus is saying, and not saying, with the admonition, "*Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*"

(Matthew 7:1-2) The word "judge", "krino" in Greek, is a rather flexible word with broad application, much like it is in English. It can mean something as simple as "evaluate" or "assess" (which Jesus is NOT taking issue with here) to self-righteously criticizing, blaming, condemning (which is the angle Jesus is taking here). Basically, Jesus is steering His followers away from attitudes and practices that result in elevating oneself above others and thereby devaluing others. And let us not forget, how we view and value others is a key theme in this Sermon.

Jesus cares very deeply about human flourishing. He understands that a key to flourishing is healthy relationships. And He knows how damaging judging/condemning is to relationships. It's almost as if Jesus is applying principles of natural law (i.e. physics, specifically Newton's Third Law—every action has an equal and opposite reaction) to relationships. In other words, if/when we judge/condemn, expect it in return. And, again, Jesus is inviting us to consider a different way of relating to each other.

A key element of judging is comparing. Which is what makes this particularly challenging because comparison is a key to how we learn and how we function in the world. Learning right from wrong, good from bad, healthy from unhealthy, etc. requires comparison. But what or how are we to compare versus not compare. Or, when do our comparisons (as a way of learning, and a way of navigating in our world) cross a line to what Jesus is speaking against here?

I think the question that needs to be asked in order to determine if we are crossing that line is: what is our relational motivation? As James Bryan Smith describes, "*Judging is making a negative evaluation of others without standing in solidarity with them.*" (emphasis added) Are we desiring to create distance between us and them or connection? Distancing ourselves creates room for contempt and condemnation, for elevating ourselves and devaluing others...this is the type of "judging" Jesus is speaking against here.

It is clear that Jesus has in mind interpersonal relationships. In other words, PEOPLE are not to be judged. Actions, behaviors, attitudes, ideas, on the other hand, are fair game. The challenge is that we have a tough time differentiating between a person and their actions/behaviors, attitudes, ideas. Paradoxically, we live in a culture/society in which people are quick to say "*Don't judge me!*" or "*Who are you to judge me?*", and just as quick to judge others. None of us like to feel judged, yet how do we feel about, say, our least favorite politician, or people who stand opposed to us on various political, social, cultural issues? Does our attitude toward them reflect Jesus' view of them? Are we honoring the image of God in them? Frankly, I see this all the

time on social media...Christians villainizing other people. This is, in part, because we have trouble separating a person from their actions/behaviors, thoughts/opinions/ideas.

I think the “Three Big Lies” that priest, theologian, and author Henri Nouwen identifies can be helpful. The lies are...

- I am what I have.
- I am what I do.
- I am what other people say/think about me.

It is critically important that we don't believe these lies about ourselves, and not allow ourselves to believe them about other people. The messed up world we live in would have us believe this is who we are. Jesus says otherwise. The substance/essence of who we are is not based on what we have (or don't have) or by what we do (or don't do)...and certainly not on the fickleness of other people's opinions. If it were, then we'd have the ideological basis for some people being worth more than others. We know that in the Kingdom, that's not how it is. (Though, sadly, that's exactly how the world operates.) We need to be very careful to not view ourselves or others through the lens of these lies. These lies also become the basis for the type of comparing and judging that Jesus speaks against.

We need to give careful examination to WHAT and WHY we are comparing. What standard is being applied? What's the measurement being employed? These lies are not the measuring stick. If the end result is us putting ourselves above others—particularly in terms of value, worth, and significance—we are doing the type of judging that Jesus is speaking against.

Interestingly, Jesus' brother James offers a warning against judging from a different angle. He warns against showing favoritism...which is judging someone positively, and wanting to draw close to them, but for all the wrong reasons/motivations (see James 2:1-4). While we need to be careful not to look down on others through judgment, we also need to be careful of being impressed with people based on values of the world as opposed to values of the Kingdom.

Furthermore, Jesus covered anger and contempt earlier in the Sermon (see 5:21-26). Dallas Willard explains, “*Contempt is a major part of condemnation...and when we drop contempt from our soul and our bearing, condemnation rarely occurs, and never with its most devastating effects. Anger is not as closely intertwined with condemnation as is contempt, but in fact there is a close association. Watching anger in action, we see that it almost always leads to condemnation—partly, no doubt, because condemnation is such a handy way of hurting people deeply. And anger desires to hurt. On the other hand, condemnation makes the road to anger a quick and easy trip. The one condemned is seen as deserving of suffering and, in any case, as not worthy of protection and respect. The condemned, in turn, responds with anger to the pain of being condemned. And around and around. Clearly, then, if we are to come to terms with condemnation we must deal with anger and contempt, and if we have dealt with anger and contempt there will be little condemnation left to deal with.*”

I also think there's something deeply psychological going on here. If our natural habit or way of being is one of judging others, then we instinctually expect them to be judging us as well...and we live in the fear of that judgment. (In psychology this is known as projection; to assume others think/do as we think/do.) So if I'm constantly judging others, I assume they are doing the same thing toward me. It is a vicious cycle of giving and receiving (and expecting) judgment. Healthy relationships cannot be sustained this way.

How do we break this cycle? Once again, the Kingdom is key. If/when we realize that our identity, our value, our worth and significance are safe and secure in the present Kingdom of God, and that His love for us never wavers, we can let go of any need to judge others, and we can withstand other people's judgment. A truly good/righteous person will have no use for judging others, and people who are "well off" or living the "good life" will not be affected much by the judgment of others. Again, this is all predicated upon the reality of the Kingdom of God, which must always be held in view in this Sermon, and in everything Jesus says and does.

Additionally, as we continue to adopt the way of Jesus, the way we view other people changes. We no longer see them as threats, or competitors, nor do we need their approval or esteem, and we no longer need to compare ourselves to them. The goal being to view others as fellow image-bearers of God, as beings of infinite worth whom God cherishes. Who are we to see them as anything less than that?

Besides, with even a little dose of humility we can recognize that we don't know everything. In order to be able to judge effectively, one would have to know everything. This is another reason why we are not to judge/condemn. We simply don't have all the facts or know all the factors at play. We don't know everything about people's stories, and we don't know their hearts. We are all in different places in the journey of Becoming. We are not who we were 10 years ago, nor are we who we will be 10 years from now. We are in process...and so is everyone else we encounter. This is why we need to leave judging to God. The reality of the Kingdom means we can extend grace, benefit of the doubt, and charitable estimation to others.

Jesus moves on to one of His most colorful, memorable, and hilarious illustrations. *"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your neighbor's eye and pay no attention to the log in your own eye?"* (Matthew 7:3) The tendency is to interpret the log/plank in our own eye as our own sinfulness in general. The logical fallacy, however, is that it leads to thinking that IF we rid ourselves of the sin in our lives, THEN we could judge others. The point Jesus is making is that judgment is the log/plank! We can't approach another person in a helpful way if we're viewing them through the lens of judgment.

Now all this does raise some questions: Is there a place for correction? How do we go about addressing wrong ideas or behaviors (be that in the home/family, in the church, or in society at large) without "judging"? Is there room/space, or just cause, to ever call a person "evil"? Or, how does saying something like, *"That person is unfit for public office."*, fit with *"Do not judge?"* Or what if our job requires us to evaluate people (their performance or for hiring purposes)...how do we avoid crossing the line to judgment? How are we to understand and apply what Jesus is saying?

These are tough questions, and I'm sure there are other similar questions that could be raised in the same vein. While I don't have time and space to delve deep into these questions, these are the types of questions we (Christians/the Church) should be processing through on a regular basis. (This is why we have contexts such as Table Groups and the Big Ask Dinner...in order to create time/space to wrestle with how to apply Jesus' teaching to our daily lives.) But for now, a good place to begin in order to think through questions like this is by asking ourselves: How am I viewing this person/these people? What is my motivation? What value system am I operating from? Am I viewing this person/these people from a Kingdom lens? This won't answer all the questions, but it's a good place to start...checking our hearts first.

I do want to at least briefly address the question of correction. I don't know about you, but I need correction from time to time (probably more often than I realize). I have been blessed by lovely caring people who had the wisdom and the courage to correct me. And I can usually tell if someone is truly trying to help me and is coming from a place of caring, versus if they're just trying to put me in my place, put me down, power up on me, or are being patronizing. Sometimes I handle it well, sometimes I do not. How we handle correction is a worthwhile conversation. But in this passage, Jesus seems more concerned about how we offer it.

The last verse in this week's passage tees us up for a conversation on correction (which will continue into next week's passage). Jesus says, *"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."* (Matthew 7:6) This is often misinterpreted/misapplied to mean do not offer our pearls of wisdom, our solutions, our help or advice to people who are unworthy of it or won't appreciate it. I suspect the reason we are quick to go with this interpretation is because we've probably experienced offering someone advice only to be rebuffed. And this illustration sounds and feels like what we've experienced. But after speaking against judging others, do we really think Jesus is going to encourage us to classify people as "dogs", "pigs" or generally unworthy? That would create a bit of a contradiction, would it not? And how do we usually respond when someone rejects or ignores our well-intended help/advice? We judge them. So maybe Jesus means something different here.

Please allow me to offer a rather lengthy excerpt from...you guessed it...Dallas Willard, *"...Jesus is not suggesting that certain classes of people are to be viewed as pigs or dogs. Nor is He saying that we should not give good things and do good deeds to people who might reject or misuse them. In fact, His teaching is precisely the opposite. We are to be like the Father in the heavens, 'who is kind to the unthankful and the evil' (Luke 6:35).*

The problem with the pearls for pigs is not that the pigs are not worthy. It is not worthiness that is in question here at all, but helpfulness. Pigs cannot digest pearls, cannot nourish themselves upon them...

Frankly, our 'pearls' often are offered with a certain superiority of bearing that keeps us from paying attention to those we are trying to help. We have solutions. That should be enough, shouldn't it? And very quickly some contempt, impatience, anger, and even condemnation slips into our offer.

And the very goodness of our 'pearl' may make us think that we couldn't possibly have the wrong attitude toward the intended recipient. Would we be offering them such pearls if our hearts were not right? Unfortunately, we just might. It has been done. And how we honestly feel when our 'pearl' is left there on the ground to be walked on by the unenthusiastic recipient will be a pretty good sign of where our heart was in the first place.

...We are always to respect other people as spiritual beings who are responsible before God alone for the course they choose to take of their own free will.

God has paid an awful price to arrange for human self-determination. He obviously places great value on it. It is, after all, the only way He can get the kind of personal beings He desires for His eternal purposes. And just as we are not to try to manipulate others with impressive language of any kind (Matt. 5:37), so we are not to harass them into rightness and goodness with our condemnations and our 'pearls' or holy things."

There is a place for guidance and correction, but we need to be very careful with it, beginning first by examining our own heart and motivation. I suspect the relationship where this comes into play most is the parent/child relationship, especially as kids grow towards adulthood and have more self-determination. As parents we want good for our children. And it is hard to watch them make poor decisions. We want to intervene. We want to spare them hurt and regret. Obviously we offer them help, wisdom, advice, etc. But if they are not accepting of it...then what? I'm going to just let that question hang there...

I'll just end by reminding us...the Kingdom is here...examine our hearts...view/value other people highly...we are invited into another way of being human and of relating to one another.

P.S. If you can get your hands on the children's book "You Are Special" by Max Lucado, it would be worth your effort.

Possible Discussion Questions

- Through our journey through the Sermon on the Mount thus far, what have you learned about yourself? What new perspectives have you gained? How do you feel challenged or confronted? What invitations are you sensing?
- Do you consider yourself a judgemental person? Or, what tends to trigger judgment in/from you?
- Can you share a time when you misjudged someone? Can you share a time when you were (or felt) misjudged?
- Do you think religious people are more prone towards judgment than others? If so, why do you think that is?
- When you judge (and we all do sometimes) why do you? What's going on in your heart? What measurement are you utilizing when you do? Or, on what basis does your value of another person go up or down? What might Jesus have to say about that?

- Who do you tend to compare yourself to? What standard of measurement do you try to hold yourself to?
- Which of Henri Nouwen's "Three Big Lies"--I am what I have; I am what I do; I am what other people say/think about me--do you struggle with? And why do you think that is?
- Can you share a time when someone didn't take your well-intended advice or help, perhaps responded quite poorly to it? Can you share a time when you didn't take someone's well-intended advice or help? What was going on in your heart at the time?
- If you've ever been in a position where you were required to evaluate others, how do you guard against judging, or valuing them as people based on their performance?
- How much do other people's opinions of you matter to you? Or, who's opinion of you matters, and why them?

Soul Training Exercise: Valuing & Affirming Others

We live in a world that teaches us to look for the worst in others, to find fault in others. But we are also part of a Kingdom that encourages us to do the opposite...to look for the best in others, and to remind each other of our great value and worth.

With that in mind, the invitation this week is to simply practice looking for the best in others. With all the various people you encounter this week...at home, at work, at school, in your neighborhood, at the store, etc., look for the positive in/about them. Then take it one step further and tell them what you see in them that you appreciate.

This exercise will require us to notice and pay attention to people a little more closely...which is good because it's hard to love others if we're not paying attention to them.

The goal is to become people who value and affirm others instead of criticizing and devaluing others. Or to say it another way, the goal is to see people through a Kingdom lens, and to encourage them by telling them what we see through that lens.