

CORNEAL FOREIGN OBJECT
Matthew 7:1-5

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Hypocrisy is a very natural state. In fact, without exerting energy and effort otherwise, it's where we all live. It's our permanent residence, short of the transforming power of the gospel.

Just a few weeks ago in our sermon series from Matthew, I was preaching on the beatitudes and came to the beatitude of mercy. "Blessed are the merciful; they shall receive mercy." I shared the story about a sign posted on the fence of a convent in Marion County, California. The sign reads, "Absolutely no trespassing. Violators will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. – Sisters of Mercy." We all chuckled and laughed, and I was quite smug in my tone regarding the obvious oversight of my Catholic sisters. Wouldn't you know, some smart aleck in this congregation came up to me afterward and said, "Pastor, I enjoyed your little story about the Sisters of Mercy, but I did notice that outside the Family Life Center on our security sign, we have posted in all caps: ARMED RESPONSE" – meaning I had cast stones at the sisters for their intimidating signs to wayward and wandering people on their property, while I myself had informed vandals that we'll show up with the guns if you are caught by our security cameras.

Hypocrisy just comes so naturally. I laughed at their sign without ever seeing the hypocrisy of our sign.

A lady answered the knock on her door to find a man with a sad expression. "I'm sorry to disturb you," he said, "but I'm collecting money for an unfortunate family in the neighborhood. The husband is out of work, the kids are hungry, the utilities will soon be cut off, and worse, they're going to be kicked out of their apartment if they don't pay the rent by this afternoon." "I'll be happy to help," said the woman with great concern. "But who are you?" "I'm the landlord," he replied without shame. (*Leadership*, Vol. 5, No. 2)

Jesus made His way up a hill in order to teach. It was an area on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, and like the teachers of His day, He sat and began to teach His followers what it was like to be in the Kingdom of God. This portion of scripture comes from Jesus' first great discourse in Matthew's gospel. It comes from what many believe to be Jesus' greatest sermon – The Sermon on the Mount.

Verse 1

"Judge not, that you be not judged" is perhaps the most abused and misunderstood verse to be found in all of scripture. It never fails – every time I channel surf and begin to watch a few moments of a pop psychology talk show. It doesn't matter what the topic is – it can be lesbian lovers who want to become mothers or transvestites from outer space – there is always some

passion filled, Bible thumping, immature believer who stands up and shouts, “Hell. Hell. You will all burn in Hell.” What a witness. Just as soon as he is finished embarrassing the cause of Christ, someone else in the audience – a self-proclaimed Bible scholar – will rebuff, “Judge not, lest you be judged.” The audience will clap and cheer since God’s Word has most certainly been shown to be on their side.

What does this verse mean? Is Jesus calling His disciples to suspend moral judgment? Is Jesus demanding that His disciples never label any behavior as sinful or wrong? Is He telling His followers it is never their place to decry the sins of the nations around them?

While many would-be theologians would like to make this verse mean just exactly that, this was never the intent of the words as they rolled off the lips of our Lord. For in the same sermon, on the same occasion, in the same context, He calls for His followers to be very discerning when it comes to those around them.

We can be sure of several things about this passage.

I. We can be sure that our Lord’s injunction to “judge not” cannot be understood as a command to suspend our moral judgment, to turn a blind eye to sin, to eschew all criticisms and to refuse to discern between truth and error, goodness and evil.

How can I be sure that Jesus does not want us to suspend our faculties that allow us to judge between right and wrong behavior in ourselves and in others?

A. To behave in such a way would contradict the very nature of humanity, whose creation in God’s image includes the ability to make value judgments – to make judgments about right and wrong.

B. For another thing, much of the Sermon on the Mount is based on the assumption that God’s people will (and really should) use our critical powers. For example, we have repeatedly heard His call to be different from the world around us and that we are to develop a righteousness which exceeds that of the Pharisees. We are not to be like the hypocrites in our piety or like the heathen in our ambition. But how can we possibly obey His teachings unless we first evaluate the performance of others and then ensure that our behavior is different from and higher than theirs?

In like vein, in Matthew 7, this very command not to judge others is followed almost immediately by two further commands: to avoid giving what is holy to dogs or pearls to pigs (verse 6), and to beware of false prophets (verse 15). It would be impossible to obey either of these commands without using our critical judgment. In order to determine our behavior towards dogs, pigs and false prophets, we must first be able to recognize a dog, a pig, or a false prophet. And in order to do that we must exercise some critical judgment.

Finally, I can be sure that Jesus is not asking us to suspend moral judgment by what is taught elsewhere in scripture. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul makes it clear that Christians are to judge those in the church. Concerning the man who sinned in the church, Paul said, “I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. Likewise,” he said, “what business is

it of mine to judge those outside the church. Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. Expel the wicked man from among you.”

Paul also said, “Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more, the things of this life?” (1 Corinthians 6:3). In 1 John, the Apostle John (like the Apostle Paul) teaches the same thing. He said, “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” If you can’t judge someone as a false prophet, you may be deceived in other words. And in Revelation 2:2, it is said in the letters to the churches, “I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, and you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.”

So we can be absolutely, positively certain that Jesus is not saying that we must stop utilizing our moral discernment. This statement comes in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ most morally rigorous discourse. It is in this particular sermon that we’re told that we are no longer to commit adultery, but we’re not to lust. Not only are we not to murder, but we’re also not to hate. We can only act thusly when we have, indeed, made moral decisions.

II. The second lesson that is clear in this passage is that Jesus does want us to judge because He proceeds to give us instructions on how to judge. And that way of judgment is to realize that as we judge others, we are also judging ourselves.

Put another way, judgment is always a community matter. We live in a society that holds up privatized morality – an individual morality. But in fact, discerning good from evil in ourselves and in others is not – is not a private matter.

That’s what we’re taught on television and by our society. Ellen DiGeneris said on television, “My God is not a judgmental God. My God does not judge.”

That may be true of “her image of God,” but if that is so, her God is not the God of the scriptures.

What the passage does say is that there is an irrevocable connection between judging others and the judgment we, ourselves, receive. The order of judging oneself before judging others is important. But we judge ourselves in order, the passage says, that we might help in the judgment of others. We take care of our own sin, we discern our own sin so that we can then help discern sin that is causing destruction in others.

It’s very true that there is a tendency to minimize our own faults and exaggerate the faults of others. We have a rosy view of ourselves and a jaundiced view of others. **I am reminded of the lady who walked into a psychiatrist’s office with a strip of bacon over each ear and a fried egg on top of her head. She said, “I’ve come to talk to you about my brother.”**

H. A. Ironside tells us the story of an incident in the life of a man called Bishop Potter. He was sailing for Europe on one of the great transatlantic ocean liners. When he went on board, he found that another passenger was to share the cabin with him. After going to see the accommodations, he came up to the purser’s desk and inquired if he could leave his gold watch and other valuables in the ship’s safe. He explained that ordinarily he never availed

himself of that privilege, but he had been to his cabin and met the man who was to occupy the other berth. Judging from his appearance, he was afraid that he might not be a very trustworthy person. The purser accepted the responsibility for the valuables and remarked, “It’s all right, Bishop, I’ll be very glad to take care of them for you. The other man has been up here and left his for the very same reason.”

Yes, the passage doesn’t tell us not to judge, it just tells us how to judge. And when we judge we must realize that it is a social event. When we judge others, we judge ourselves. Together we come before the throne of God.

John Wesley said, “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; and no holiness but social holiness.” (A. J. Conyers, “The Forsaken Art of Christian Judgment,” George W. Truett Theological Seminary Convocation, Baylor University)

Jesus is really saying that only those who are willing to submit to judgment can judge. Only those who have the log taken out of their eye can see clearly to take the speck out of someone else’s eye.

Strange title for our sermon today, “Corneal Foreign Body,” but I hope you have pieced together its meaning. I have a long history and present relationship with corneal foreign bodies. While in college, I was lifting weights, exercising, and a little piece of iron from the dumbbell fell into my eye, embedded itself into my cornea, and began to rust. The pain was absolutely excruciating. I went to an optometrist, who extracted the little piece of metal out of my eye, brought me great relief, and then sent my insurance a bill for removing a “corneal foreign body.”

I’m not afraid of many things, but I am terrified of corneal foreign bodies. I have this unbelievable propensity to get something in my eye. My optometrist will tell you I am a regular visitor, and every time it’s the same – he has to remove a corneal foreign body. It begins with a little pain, a little dryness, a little itching, then a red eyeball, and then a trip to have the trash extracted from my eye.

It’s a psychological phenomenon, too. You can be weed-whacking a hundred yards away, and I will guarantee you it won’t be long until I feel and am harmed by a corneal foreign body. So if anybody in this room is an expert on specks in the eye, let me tell you I’ve been there, done that, and expect to be there again.

Before you attempt to remove the log out of your brother’s eye, first get the sawdust, the corneal foreign body, out of your own.

In fact, we often set arbitrary standards. We establish them before or after the person even commits the act. They are portable rules, easily exchanged for other arbitrary decrees. They can be completely inconsistent standards, yet remain in our judgmental carrying case. We, as arbitrary judges, carry with us ammunition for any side of any battle.

We have to be careful, so careful, that we’re not hypocritical, that we’re not jaundiced in our view of others.

We set up false criteria and we judge others based upon our own strengths. We compare their weaknesses against our strengths. I had a roommate once in college who always kept – I mean always kept his car absolutely spotless. It was a baby blue General Motors car with a white canvas top. It looked as if he had just left the car wash every single day. “You know,” he said on one occasion, “you can tell a lot about a person by the way he keeps his car.”

When we judge others based upon our strengths compared to their weaknesses, we begin to feel really good about ourselves. That type of judging makes us feel superior.

Alexander Pope expressed the problem well.

**Of all the causes which conspire to blind
Man’s erring judgment and misguide the
What the weak head with the strongest
Is pride, the never failing vice of fools.**

**mind,
bias rules,**

(An Essay on Criticism, II)

We judge ourselves less harshly because we see ourselves in light of our intentions and motivations, which are invisible to others. We view others predominately in light of the behaviors which are visible to us. When we evaluate ourselves, we know that even when our actions are not perfect, at least we meant well. Since we have the inside story on ourselves, we tend to be more patient and less harsh in our judgment of ourselves. Unfortunately, we seldom try to understand other people’s attitudes and behaviors from their own perspectives, from their own frames of reference.

Be careful when you judge. You set up a standard for yourself.

In Romans 2:3, Paul says something similar when he writes, “So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment?” The Apostle Paul is saying that whenever you, a mere man, make judgments you better make sure that you do not do the same things.

III. There is a third thing I think the passage really does say. While it does not tell us not to suspend moral discernment, while it does not tell us that we can behave any way we want to behave and not expect to receive a word of warning from our brothers and sisters in Christ (it just doesn’t fit the comprehensive picture of scripture or the comprehensive picture of church discipline), third, it is true that we must be careful to spend most of the time evaluating ourselves and not most of our time evaluating others. And, certainly, we don’t evaluate others until we have honestly evaluated ourselves.

I told this story at his funeral and the family chuckled, so I think it’s fair game to repeat here.

Years ago, First Baptist Church purchased the old doctor’s building right down the street from here. The building was then an orange brick, you may remember, with an aqua blue trim. Maybe the perfect colors at some point in time, but not so much for today’s color palette. We decided to paint the brick and the trim to match the rest of our campus – to tone down the aqua blue to beautify the property. It is now our International Ministries Center. We were putting a bright white primer

coat on the brick. That's when I received a phone call. The message was left on my answering machine. In fact, I had not yet met Rufus Gaut, but he introduced himself on my answering machine as he proceeded to inform me that one should never ever paint brick. It was a maintenance nightmare, and it just wasn't a good idea. It was going to ruin downtown. As I listened to Rufus's long message, I realized that he owned the property across the street from the newly acquired property of First Baptist Church, and he was worried about us bringing down his property values by painting our brick. He was about to put his property on the market.

"Wait a minute," I thought to myself. "Rufus is calling from a painted brick building. How can that man be sitting in his painted brick building and lecture me about the fact that one should never, never ever paint brick." I picked up the phone. "Rufus, this is Howard Batson at First Baptist Church. I received your message, and I want you to know that's just a prime coat. It's going to look really nice. In fact, we're trying to match that really nice painted brick building across the street that has that nice beige tone. Oh, that's your building, isn't it, Rufus? That's quite an irony that you're sitting in a painted brick building while you're lecturing me on how one should never ever paint brick."

Silence on the other end of the phone.

"I see your point, Dr. Batson," he said. Rufus laughed, and we became good friends from then on. And we bought his painted brick property, too.

There are some people who are so blind to their own faults simply because they spend all their time looking at the faults of others. They are censorious. They are people born with a very critical, judgmental spirit.

None of us really like the constant critic. In fact, I have found myself much more open to criticism from those who are usually positive, because I know they have really thought through their criticism. It really means something. It probably is uncomfortable for them to share the criticism, and they've put a lot of thought into it before they make mention of their concern. It's folks like that each of us really listens to – and not the constant carper, the constant complainer.

It would do many of us well to record all of our words for a single day and have them transcribed – just see how censorious we really are. If you think the whole world is broken, that everybody else is wrong, that you're the only one who holds great wisdom or good ideas, then I've got some very disappointing news for you. You live in a world of your own creation and a world of self-delusion.

It was Dale Carnegie who said, "Any fool can criticize, condemn, and complain...and most of them do." In fact, we almost live in an epidemic these days where there are more critics than there are actors, more people throwing stones than those dodging the stones on the stage of life.

Theodore Roosevelt said it is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; who knows the great

enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement; and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

So what is Jesus saying? He is not telling us that we are to stop calling sin wrong and what is right, right. He is not saying that we should suspend our moral discernment, the gift He has given to us. In fact, the prophet says, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and prudent in their own sight” (Isaiah 5:20-21).

God has standards. They have been revealed in His word. They are fixed and unchanging. He has said what is right and what is wrong. He has revealed what is good and what is evil. We must first apply God’s standards to ourselves, and then, and only then, seek to apply that standard in order to help others get out of the trap and the fault of sin.

Two by fours and corneal foreign bodies. We are never to leave the sawdust in another’s eye. But only after we’ve gotten the two by four out of ours.