

¹ "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ² For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

³ "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in someone else's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴ How can you say, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from the other person's eye.

⁶ "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 7:1-6

¹⁵ "If a brother or sister sins, go and point out the fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶ But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' ¹⁷ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

¹⁸ "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

¹⁹ "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

-- Matthew 18:15-20

In 2007, the Barna Group concluded a three-year study on young adults that found that the most commonly held negative image of Christians was that we, not surprisingly, are a judgemental lot. The second most common negative image of American Christianity is that we are hypocrites. Although we all know that popular stereotypes need to be handled carefully, what surprised pollsters was how many of these assumptions were not based on second hand misinformation, but rather how many people came to these conclusions based

on personal experience.¹ It may only be a stereotype to see the people of God as judgmental or hypocritical, but with every stereotype there comes a grain of truth. Very often, we *can* be harsh in our understanding of others and unforgiving when they reveal the places where Christlikeness has yet to take hold. And too often, we only *speak* of pouring out the lovingkindness of God and then we dry up when the time comes to do more than talk.

The passage we have just read is one that is often thrown into our churchgoing faces by the hundreds of thousands of people who have been wounded by our hamhanded attempts to adhere to what we think Jesus teaches us. “*Judge not, lest the log in your eye smite me in my eye as well,*” they sometimes say—misquoting the text but somehow getting the point anyway. In response, many churches seeking to be relevant often advertise themselves as “non-judgemental”, when what they really mean is that they are merely tolerant.²

Yet can we really blame the world at large for this longing? After all, what believers and nonbelievers both share is a hunger for acceptance for who we are in spite of our sin. What we all crave—man, woman, child, white, asian, gay, straight, in our right minds or out of them—is a love stronger than sin, and stronger than death.

However, where we often go wrong in yearning for a place to be completely loved as *we are* is when our expectations of love are projected onto others. We tend to think someone is loving only if they have a warm demeanour and a smile on their faces. Speaking loving words often means speaking benign sweet nothings that tickles our ears but does little to

¹ 87% “judgemental”, 85% hypocritical. Web Source: “A New Generation Expressions its Skepticism and Frustration with Christianity” (<http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/94-a-new-generation-expresses-its-skepticism-and-frustration-with-christianity>, first accessed Sept. 9th, 2009)

² Tolerance is not the same as a lack of judgement, for tolerance is the simple willingness to withstand differences, not blindness to them.

encourage growth in Christlikeness. And when we are unwilling to hear and obey the dictates of what God's love is like, we live only in the *appearance* of love for one another. What we hope opens people up to grace becomes just another mask we wear for the approval of others.

If you would remember one thing today, remember this: Jesus is not about such shallow, narcissistic love. In the exercise of real love, we are to quit playing God with other's lives, but not suspend our critical faculties.

Only ignorant mouths that read verse 1 out of context proclaim that we shouldn't judge at all. Yet there *is* a splinter in someone else's eye. If we are to be lovers, what kinds of lovers would we be if we saw our sister stumbling in pain and did nothing to help her? We would not be lovers at all— though not worse than those about whom Jesus also speaks: those who are insensitive to their own sin. The problem, you see, is not being blind to the splinter in someone else's eye. The problem is being blind to the log in our own.

At this point, we need to step back from the Sermon on the Mount as a whole and recall that what we have been drinking deeply from is the ethic of the Kingdom of God. Not a new law, *per se*, but a description of the covenant relationship we now have with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as a description of what loving one another really looks like. At its very heart, the Sermon on the Mount becomes a matter of relationship—first of loving the living God, second of loving each other. And it bears remembering that the key to this Kingdom ethic lies in Jesus' first words in chapter 5: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, the mourners, and the meek.*"³ This is the beginning of life in the Kingdom of God that is invading the here and now and looks ahead to the not yet. We are not only to approach loving God out

³ Matt 5: 2-5

of humility, but in humility to consider others better than ourselves⁴ and, if we love at all, to examine ourselves for faults before we try to help them.

For those who look within and find no fault and no sin, God bless you—this word is not for you, and, I dare say, neither is this church. Yet for we who dare to look deep within and be humbled by the deep currents of sin that still stir within us, it is all too easy to become paralyzed by how awful we are. We might begin to say “I cannot help my brother because I need help myself.” However, this is *exactly* what we need to say to ourselves. When we admit that the people we care for do not need us as much as they need to be restored by Christ, we open the door for Christ to work through us. It is when we say “I *will* not help my brother because I need help myself” that we err. And so, out of a concern for our image and the sake of appearing to be nice people who don’t rock the boat, we fail to love each other well.

Then what are we to do with the painful feeling that we are not good enough to help anyone, least of all ourselves? Never lose sight of it and live in light of it. This is what it means to grow in the grace of God: that while we were still haters of God, he died for us and paid the debt we owed. When we grasp this, there is absolutely no reason why we could ever leave another person in pain nor approach this person without first feeling weak and disqualified from doing so. When we see ourselves as beneficiaries of unmerited favour from God, we cannot in good conscience ever attempt to help another from any other angle *except* as a co-pilgrim. We walk together as the wounded, the broken, the deficient and the weak—but also as grateful recipients of the grace of God. As the 17th century thinker Francois Fenelon said: “*Nothing will make us so generous and merciful to the faults of others as*

⁴ Phil 2:3

seeing our own.” This is how we learn what it means to walk with our God and with each other in humility.

However, not everyone is able to receive our help. Even when we approach each other in as humble and kind a way as possible, many among us are unwilling to be freed by the truth that those who love us want to speak into our lives. Thus when Christ speaks of being careful not to give what is sacred to dogs or to throw our pearls before pigs, he is cautioning us to be careful about how we perceive the readiness of others to receive our care—or even what kind of care we ought to be giving. Again, we also see here that Jesus is *not* against judgement—rather, a better way of understanding what Jesus is advocating is that he wants us to be *discerning*, to be a people who are mindful of others and who take the time to learn where the other person is coming from before pronouncing our cures.

Yet in a society that dispenses cures of the soul in the same way we dispense Aspirin at the pharmacy, who has the time and the patience to allow others to unfold themselves and be open to care? This is why those of us who say “*we care*” often do not know what we are saying. When it comes to dealing with our sin, there is no shortcut. There is only the long, slow road to the cross.

What we should be reminded of today is that we need each other in deep and intimate ways that simply coming to service on a Sunday morning cannot do. When we come here, we come to worship—yet much of the care and building up that we need cannot occur in an hour and a half time slot. We are sometimes ships passing in the night, silently chugging on towards some unknown destination. We smile and engage in small talk, but never dig deeper than five minutes of face time can allow. Many of us will sprint off as soon as Bread and Cup are given, our religious fix thus fulfilled. It is worth asking now and again for as long as I am

able: is this the kind of community we want? Do you want a church of spectators that nods and smiles as the preacher speaks pretty, or do you want to become a part of the Body of Christ? Are you satisfied with sitting in silent contentment while others bare their souls, or does the prayer “Your Kingdom come” rise up out of your burning heart? Do we only want another repetition of churchianity, or do our bones cry out for intimacy with Christ and with each other?

If your heart has said “yes, *I want this. I want to know Jesus, I want to be like him, and I want to be a part of a people struggling to become like him,*” then you need only do one thing: humble yourself. For as long as we maintain facades of perfection, we remain untouched and grace penetrates as far as icing on a bowling ball. However, should we allow ourselves to finally live in brokenness and show our cracks, grace abounds all the more.⁵ And this grace, working into our cracks, waters the seed of divine love sown in us, growing Christ in us and bearing fruit for all.

- 1.) How have you been hurt by condemnation in the past? Why do you think people are quick to condemn others?
- 2.) Are you a person who is willing to hear and apprehend the truth?

⁵ Rom 5:20