

## **Discernment Versus Judgment**

**Matthew 7:1-6**

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On Tuesday, I visited my eye doctor. As I sat in his examining room, he read my chart and asked, "Are you still taking your eye drops?" I replied that I had finished all but one type. He shook his head while I was talking and then inquired, "Did the technician ask you if you were still taking your drops when she examined you?" I replied that she did not. He let out a groan, reached for the phone and buzzed her to come at once. A few seconds later, the hapless technician entered the room and received a sharp rebuke for not asking me about my eye drops. The doctor scolded her, "Failing to do a thorough examination and failing to make complete entries on a patient's chart can cause more serious mistakes to be made." The young woman readily agreed, said she was very sorry and exited the room.

As the sound of her footsteps faded away, the doctor examined my eyes with his merciless light. With great satisfaction, he proclaimed that he had done a perfect job with the surgery he had performed on my eyes and then he returned to my chart. With a start, he sat up, swung over in front of me again, took his merciless light and lit up my eyes once more. The frenetic nature of his technique unnerved me a bit.

In the midst of this second exploration, he said "whew!", shut off the light and went back to my chart. Seeing my consternation, he explained, "For a minute there I thought I had forgotten to remove your sutures the last time you were here. Thankfully I did remove them, I just forgot to note it on your chart."

If I had known him a little better, I might have said, "I've heard that failing to make complete entries on a patient's chart, can cause more serious mistakes to be made," but he knows how to wield a scalpel so I wisely kept my thoughts to myself.

Jesus asked, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye."

On one level, the teaching is clear. We have enough problems to work on, we don't need to focus our attention on pointing out the other person's flaws. So why do we? Both Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud said that criticism of others is a form of projection. Instead of dealing with our own deficiencies, we project them on to others and then lambaste them for the very things we dislike most about ourselves. The problem is, according to both masters of psychology, that by projecting our more destructive traits onto others, we remain unaware of the very problems for which we need the most help. Jung put the problem this way, "projection is the primary mechanism by which we keep ourselves unaware about ourselves."

This strange aspect of human behavior explains how an attorney general in New York can lead a crusade against prostitution while using the services of a prostitute. This explains how a t.v. late night comic can poke fun at the inappropriate sexual antics of all sorts of powerful people, while engaged in similar antics himself. This explains how you and I can judge others harshly for attitudes we harbor in our own hearts.

Of course Jesus was on to this some 1800 years before Freud and Jung were born. He taught us to pay attention to the criticisms we make and the judgmental attitudes we hold. Instead of spewing them on others, however, Jesus told us to take a look at how we manifest the same defects and seek God's help to remove them from

our lives.

The next time we feel like upbraiding someone for his irresponsible attitude, we ought to first reflect on our own shiftless ways. When our blood pressure rises to a boiling point over the self-centered behavior of others, we ought to stop and check our own hearts and minds for signs of narcissism. When we've had it with the criticism of others, we should hold our tongue and check our own judgmental spirits.

As I said, this part of the teaching is hard to miss. There is another side to this topic, however, that is slightly more complex. Let's go back to my office visit. If a doctor sees an employee make a mistake, should she not voice her criticism? Isn't it true that some mistakes do lead to much larger ones? Should the doctor be required to first make sure she is perfect in every way before calling attention to an intern's sloppy technique or detrimental practices? Did Jesus mean to prevent us from evaluating another person's behavior until we can prove that we are inerrant in every way.

We have evidence that he did not mean to convey such a message from his own words in verse six of today's passage. There Jesus said, "Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you." How are we to know who will act like dogs toward our holy gifts and who will be swine-like in response to our pearls, if we are forbidden from evaluating others' behavior? Is it possible to show discernment without being judgmental?

I think Jesus was saying it is. To judge another person requires that we claim abilities no one but God possesses. Specifically, when we judge or condemn others, we do so based on our assumption that we can either read the other person's true motive or know the future.

When I worked with homeless people in Bethesda, I often encountered young men who claimed their parents had turned their backs on them. In my early days of serving that population, I quickly formed caustic judgments of those parents. "How could a family be so hard hearted as to tell their son, we're not going to help you.?"

Then I got more involved and, in my attempts to help the young men who slept on the streets, I contacted their parents. In one or two cases, the parents did indicate callousness toward the needs of their sons. I talked to a few moms and dads that just didn't want to be bothered by their struggling offspring. Most of my conversations, however, were with parents who were in anguish over the plight of their sons. As their stories unfolded, I heard of efforts, far more compassionate and heroic than I could imagine employing, to turn their sons around from drug addiction or mental illnesses. The majority of the parents I encountered, were tormented by the fact that the only way they knew to help their sons, was to let them go their own way until they turned to them or someone else for help. The point is, I had read their behavior and unfairly thought I could read their motives. Only God can see the human heart, you and I cannot. When our negative evaluations of others are based on motivations we ascribe to them, we are practicing the kind of judgment Jesus forbid.

The same is true when our evaluations are based on our ability to see the future. The Supreme Court is currently considering whether giving life sentences to teenagers is a form of cruel and unusual punishment. The case they are discussing involves a 33 year old man by the name of Joe Harris Sullivan. Joe has already served

twenty years for a rape he committed when he was thirteen. Unless the Supreme Court finds the practice unconstitutional, Joe will spend the rest of his life in a Florida prison for a crime he committed when he was barely out of grammar school.

Judge Nicholas Geeker gave Joe his life sentence without possibility of parole. On the day the thirteen-year-old boy was locked in prison, Judge Geeker said, "This boy is irredeemable. He is beyond help and I'm going to send him away for as long as I can."

Evidently, Judge Geeker's evaluation of Joe Sullivan was based on his ability to know the future. The Judge said the boy could not be redeemed, he could not be helped. Not at fifteen Judge? Not at twenty-five judge? Not at fifty-three judge? Never? Ever?

Whenever we express our contempt for another with words like, "You're never going to change. You'll never amount to anything. You've always been a trouble-maker and you always will be. Your going to turn out just like your Aunt Betty," those are evaluations based on our ability to read the future. Only God knows the future, so Jesus forbid that kind of condemnation.

Discernment, however, is based on external evidence, verifiable history and present behavior. If you meet a man and discover that he beat his first wife and his former girlfriend and if you've already seen flashes of temper, you'd better not put your pearls before swine. He may not always be pig-like, but based upon external evidence, verifiable history and present behavior, he's a swine at the moment.

If your friend gossips about everybody you know, telling their most sacred secrets to you whenever the two of you are alone, I wouldn't recommend trusting her with any of your confidential pearls. She may not always trample your revelations under foot, but based upon external evidence, verifiable history and present behavior, she's an oinker right now.

Judgment is a negative evaluation of others based either on the projection of our own faults on to them or upon on our claim to read motivation or see the future. Jesus forbid it. Christ's anti-dote to a judgmental heart is self-examination. Discernment is a negative evaluation we give to others based on external evidence, verifiable history and present behavior. Jesus recommended it and said it leads to healthy self-protection.

Here's the good news. Unlike you and me, Christ has the ability to look into the human heart and he knows the future. He sees all our sins, past, present and future and invites us to turn to him so he can help us repent of our sins and grow into his likeness. Jesus sees the logs and the specks in our eyes and has the love and power to look beyond our faults, see our need and transform us into redeemed children of God. Let us put our flawed lives and the lives of all the broken people we know into those saving hands.