

PRACTICE GODLY DISCERNMENT**MATTHEW 7:1-6**

There's always a risk in judging others. Years ago a pastor was visiting one of the members of his church at her home. The conversation lagged a bit at one point, so the woman pointed out her window to her neighbor's back yard where the laundry was hanging out on the line. Do you remember those days? Anyway, she said, "Do you see that lady's laundry next door? Look how dirty it is. She never hangs out a clean wash." The pastor didn't quite know how to respond to that comment and just decided it was time to draw his visit to a close and move on with his day. As he was leaving, the woman walked out onto the front porch with him. The laundry next door was clearly visible to them both. They both realized at the same time that the laundry was actually sparkling, dazzling white – as white as white could be. The truth dawned on them that it wasn't the neighbor's laundry that was dirty. Instead, it was the window – belonging to the woman the pastor was visiting - through which the laundry had been seen. That's what was dirty. There's always a risk in judging others.

Jesus knew how destructive judging can be to personal relationships in every arena of life – your family, your neighborhood, your workplace, your church. Is there anyone here this morning that isn't guilty of badly misjudging another person's motives or actions? By the same token, is there anyone here who hasn't been on the receiving end of a harsh or inaccurate evaluation of your conduct or motives? Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is a description of what His disciples – not just the Twelve, but anyone who wants to follow Him as Savior and Lord – look like and act like. Apparently, discernment was an area of life and living that Jesus concluded was important enough to address in His message. Let's read what he said and then think about it together. Now, it's obvious that Jesus' first concern is that you and I...

AVOID DESTRUCTIVE JUDGING.

Let's begin by recognizing what Jesus is not saying. Is He suggesting that you just overlook the faults of others and pretend or act as if they don't exist? No. Is Jesus implying that you should have a tolerant, indulgent, "live and let live" attitude toward those who express behavior or attitudes that are wrong or sinful? No. Some people argue today that followers of Jesus shouldn't stand against abortion or gay marriage because of what Jesus says here. Everything should be tolerated. That's absurd. Nowhere in the Bible are you ever encouraged to overlook sin, condone wrongdoing, or refuse to evaluate questionable behavior all in the name of not judging others.

I say that with great confidence because of what else Jesus says here. "Don't waste what is holy on people who are unholy. Don't throw your pearls to pigs! They will trample the pearls, then turn and attack you." (Mt 7:6 NLT) He compares some people's ability to understand and receive spiritual truth to pigs. Then, he encourages us, His followers, to evaluate – to make a judgment, in other words – whether sharing spiritual truth with some people is just such a waste of time. He also says in this same chapter, "Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep but are really vicious wolves." (Mt 7:15 NLT) How do you determine if someone is a false

prophet unless you make a judgment? If Jesus's intention is to teach that His followers should never exercise discernment, He Himself would be the greatest contradiction of His own teaching! After all, Jesus called the Jewish king in that day and time – King Herod – “that fox.” It's wasn't a compliment! He referred to the religious leaders of his days as snakes, whitewashed graves and wolves in sheep's clothing. That required judging. The first Christians were called to judge others in some cases. Paul, the great Christian leader, told the Christians in one city, Corinth, to kick an immoral man out of their church. Another leader, John, who wrote so much about love in what became our New Testament, refused to welcome certain men into his home whom he deemed to be false teachers. All that involved judgment.

What, then, did Jesus mean here? First, Jesus' disciples are forbidden the kind of judgment that writes a person off contemptuously. It's critical, harsh, demeaning judgment. It dismisses a human being made in God's image as being of no value or worth. It heaps scorn on someone for whom Jesus died just like He died for you. Second, it's judgment that expresses itself more through careless gossip rather than loving confrontation. Instead of facing a person gently and directly with his or her faults, it enjoys revealing embarrassing information to others that humiliates the person being judged. It has no compassion. Instead, it ends up being all about attacking and ruining someone's life and reputation. Third, it's judgment that is always premature – it's handed out long before the facts are known, motives examined, or circumstances understood. It can happen so easily in your home, in your neighborhood, in your extended family, in your workplace, and in your church. No is exempt from it.

Charles Spurgeon is sometimes regarded as the greatest preacher who ever lived. He pastored a large church in England in the last half of the 1800s. He was a great man of God. He and his wife kept chickens and would sell off the extra eggs that the chickens produced. They adamantly refused to give away any of those eggs. Even close relatives were told, “You may have them if you pay for them.” As a result, some people labeled the Spurgeons as greedy, grasping, and less than generous. They were fully aware of this criticism, but they chose not to defend themselves. Only after both of them had died was the full story revealed. All the profits from the sale of those eggs went to support two elderly widows.

Jesus wants you to avoid destructive judging. Why? First, when you practice this kind of judging you actually advertise blindness to your own faults and failings. It's like all of us football fans when Ohio State plays a lousy game – and they've had a few this fall! We grouse, we growl, we make sweeping statements about the players' abilities and the coaches' intelligence. But none of us could ever play or coach at the level of those men. The world is full of people who claim a right to be vocal in their criticism and yet are totally inactive in the area they criticize. As a pastor, I've observed that some of the folk most vocal about the church's shortcomings are the least involved.

Second, Jesus says that destructive judging does more harm than good. He provided this comical image of a person with a 2X8 sticking out of his eye while trying to get a speck of sawdust out of someone else's eye. One commentator referred to this kind of

person as “old Plank-Eye.” He described him like this, “Though it is an extremely delicate operation, the first to volunteer his services is old Plank-Eye himself who gropes himself toward you. He has known all along that you had that splinter (natural for him, of course, because it probably came off his plank), but he just hasn’t been quite sure how to approach you about it. Of course, you know he’s an expert splinter-picker – he has been at it all his life. He doesn’t want to hurt you either. No hard feelings or anything like that, understand. He really hates to be so frank, but since it’s for your own good – wham! He bumps into you so hard that with the plank protruding out of his eye, he well-nigh puts out both your eyes! Your bleeding face and blinding pain cause him to believe that the operation is successfully over. Plank-Eye feels warm inside because he has been able to render such incalculable service.” (William Barclay) Have you ever run into old Mr. Plank-Eye? Have you ever been old Mr. Plank Eye? God forbid!

Avoid destructive judging, thirdly, because you will injure yourself. You reap what you sow in life. If you judge others harshly and contemptuously, you can expect the same treatment. In fact, God will see to it. If you rush to judgment or if you prefer to gossip about others instead of confronting them in love, God will make sure you get a taste of that same meal. It’s wise to remember that simple truth in every one of life’s relationships – in your marriage, among members of your family, in your workplace, at school, and, yes, even at church. Heed the warning in Jesus words here, “For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged.” (Mt 7:2 NLT)

At the beginning of the 1900s, the world’s most distinguished astronomer was certain that there were canals on the planet Mars. Sir Percival Lowell was fascinated by Mars. Lowell spent a good part of his life just looking at the planet through a giant telescope in Arizona, mapping the channels and canals that he saw. He was convinced the channels were proof of intelligent life on Mars. Lowell’s observations gained wide acceptance. He was so eminent and respected, no one dared to contradict his findings. There was just one problem. They aren’t any canals on Mars. Subsequent space probes have mapped the entire planet. No canals. We’ve put spacecrafts on the surface of Mars. No canals. So, what did Sir Percival Lowell see? We know now that he suffered from a rare eye disease that made him see the blood vessels in his own eyes. The Martian canals he saw were nothing more than the veins of his own eyeballs. Today, the condition is known as “Lowell’s syndrome.” That can happen to you and me spiritually. We can see faults in others so clearly. We think we have a firsthand view of their shortcomings, when in fact our own vision is distorted by our own battle with sin. Every one of us has – or will – know the pain of destructive judging. Avoid it. But Jesus goes on here to suggest that you and I are called from time to time to...

RENDER DELICATE JUDGING.

Jesus didn’t say just to leave a splinter in someone’s eye if you see it there. He said, “First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend’s eye.” (Mt 7:5 NLT) There is a time and a place to confront wrong behavior or attitudes in other people’s lives – especially fellow followers of Jesus. Is it

fun? No. Can it be distasteful? Yes. But God doesn't want you to let a person go through life unaware of the pain he or she is causing others as well as himself or herself. It's just as bad not to confront someone in love about sinful attitudes and behavior as it is to render destructive judgment on someone. The Bible says, "Dear brothers and sisters, if another believer is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself." (Gal 6:1 NLT)

In Matthew 18, Jesus provides a process. He says if someone has offended you, it's your responsibility to take the initiative, go to and discuss it with that person. I don't like that approach! I clearly prefer to have someone who offended me see the error of his ways and take the first step, but Jesus says it ought to be the other way around. If I'm the one offended, I'm supposed to go and seek out reconciliation. If you can work it out between the two of you, that's great. If not, Jesus says to take another follower of Jesus with you and try again. If that doesn't work, Jesus says to take it to the entire church so they can help you figure out the right thing to do. Jesus concludes his advice by saying people who refuse to offer or receive reconciliation ought to be kicked out of the church! Clearly, Jesus believed it was vitally important to handle conflict and offenses between people the right way – the God-honoring way.

When you consider other Bible passages, it becomes clear that having a right attitude toward confrontation is very important. First, you make up your mind to speak the truth in love. The Bible says, "Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ." (Eph 4:15 NLT) Have I known people who had the courage to approach me about a behavior or an attitude in my life that needed correction? Absolutely! And as important as the correction happened to be, it was the way in which they did it that mattered most. It was offered with a loving, humble attitude that revealed genuine concern for me. Have I known people who did it wrong? Sure! It always feels like an attack. I felt put down and humiliated. Even if what they said was true, their lack of love ruined whatever they said. Speaking the truth in love is a spiritual art form and I don't think it's possible without being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Here's another godly attitude toward confrontation: reject the use of anger. Most of us have already learned the hard way that getting angry with another person for just about any reason is like pouring gasoline on a fire. The Bible's pretty direct about the usefulness of your anger and mine. It says, "Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires." (Jam 1:19-20 NLT) Here's another helpful attitude when you have to confront someone: intense and honest self-examination before you confront someone. If you enjoy correcting people, you've got a problem. If you just can't wait to straighten people out, you've got issues. If confronting others about wrong attitudes and behavior is easy for you, do the world a favor – don't! That's what Jesus was getting at when he said, "First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye." (Mt 7:5 NLT)

I appreciate the story of man who went to his dentist for some fairly extensive dental work. The patient reacted to Novocaine very slowly. For some reason it just took longer for the Novocaine to take effect. As a result, he felt some discomfort and pain during the drilling process. When the dentist could tell that his patient was feeling the drilling, he asked, "Are you still feeling pain?" The patient said, "Oh, I feel it a little bit, but it doesn't bother me." The dentist responded, "Well, it bothers me." He stopped for several minutes until the anesthetic became more effective. Delicate judgment. If I have to do it, I will, but I'm going to do it as delicately, as sensitively, as lovingly, and as kindly as possible. Can you imagine what a difference it would make in our marriages, our parent/child relationships, our neighborhoods, our workplaces and schools, and in our church if we all would just follow Jesus teaching here? Avoid destructive judgment. Render delicate judgment. But let me touch on just one more area that Jesus brings up. There are going to be times when you and I are going to have to...

PRACTICE DISCERNING JUDGMENT.

In verse six of Matthew 7 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 turn and tear you to pieces." (NIV) What is that about? Doesn't it sound pretty harsh and "unJesus-like"? It's even harder to reconcile when Jesus has just told us not to judge others. Both dogs and pigs were despised animals by Jewish people in Jesus' day. And yet Jesus compares some people to dogs and pigs. Who is Jesus talking about and why does He use imagery that sounds offensive to our ears?

Jesus is talking about people who are not only lost spiritually, but who are absolutely closed off to anything having to do with God. He's certainly not talking about all lost people. There were many spiritually lost people back then – and many, many today – who are searching for a relationship with God even though they may not even be aware of it consciously. They can be reached for Jesus as you extend friendship to them which can and should lead to sharing your faith with them at some point. That's the conviction behind our wanting you to start thinking and praying now about who you will invite to the Celtic Christmas Celebration and our other Christmas events. Don't you dare say to yourself, "Well, I'm not interested in doing that. That's for other people to do, not me." If you're a follower of Jesus, you are always and forever intentionally looking for people to point to Jesus and for great opportunities where that exposure to Jesus can happen. Come on now, people of God, let's not drop the ball!

Now all of that being said, Jesus knew there is a kind of a lost person who is absolutely hardened against God. He mocks the Christian faith. She's contemptuous of spiritual things. He scorns the Word of God. She repeatedly rejects the truth about Jesus defiantly and decisively. Frankly, Jesus suggests, there are lost people whose appreciation for God is a like a dog or a pig trying to appreciate beautiful jewelry. A dog wouldn't know what to do with a diamond ring. If you threw a pearl necklace into a pig's home, chances are all he'd do would be to sniff and snort at it. When he discovered that he couldn't eat it, he might just grind it into the muck. Or even worse, that old pig might resent the fact you just tried to feed him a useless snack and attack you! You and

I have to be discerning. There's a time to share the good news about Jesus and a time not to offer it because the other person doesn't yet have the capacity to receive it. It might be moral blindness, intellectual pride, or cynical mockery. You can still pray for hardened people and ask God to soften their hearts. You can still look for opportunities to share Jesus with them when the moment is right. But practice discerning judgment.

A closing thought. It occurs to me that there are times when you and I – most of us here are disciples or followers of Jesus – trample underfoot, so to speak, spiritual pearls of great value that God has given to us. For example, God has given us the great pearl of an intimate, personal relationship with Him, but we can neglect it. How so? We don't read and reflect on God's Word so we can hear His voice. We don't access Him through prayer. We don't give ourselves intentionally to being a growing disciple of Jesus. We don't seek to come alongside someone else and disciple him or her. God offers us peace and grace in the midst of life's trials, and yet we can still live stressed out lives and become slaves of worry. God has given each of us a mission that's as big as eternity: to love and serve Him and to seek to bring others into an eternal relationship with Him. And yet you and I can so easily replace His mission for our lives with our own agendas and be content to live lives of quiet selfishness. We stop looking for those who need to discover His love and grace and then ask God for the privilege of being channels of His love and grace into those people's lives. I hope and pray this morning that there aren't some pearls of great value that God is withholding from me because – like a dog or pig – I'm just not able to appreciate what He's given to me.

One bright, sunny morning a botanist made his way to the moors outside his home in Scotland to study his favorite flowers. He stretched out full length on a grassy slope and then carefully plucked a flower called a heather bell. Then, he pulled out a small microscope and began to scrutinize the flower. He got totally entranced by the incredible, delicate beauty of that little flower! He saw a shadow fall on the ground near him and, looking up, saw an old shepherd with a weather-beaten face. The old man looked down at him with half-concealed amusement. You could tell that he thought this scientist just a little crazy for wasting his time studying such a common thing as a heather bell. The botanist urged the shepherd to bend down and see for himself. So the shepherd dropped to his knees in the dry grass and looked through the microscope at the frail little blossom. The botanist asked him, "Isn't it beautiful?" Slowly, the old shepherd pulled himself away. His eyes were moist now and he replied thoughtfully, "It is beautiful... beautiful beyond words. And just think of the thousands of times I've trampled them under my feet!"

One day Jesus will come and knock at the door of your heart. God is offering you the pearl of greatest value – an eternal relationship with Him through Jesus. Have you put your trust in Jesus and what He did for you at the cross and the empty tomb? How many times will He offer that pearl before you take it? How many times does Jesus have to knock before you open the door? Follower of Jesus, disciple of Jesus, Christian, there are many other times Jesus comes and offers us spiritual treasure. Do you see it for what it's worth? Do you see how precious and valuable it is? Do you keep the door of your life open to Him?