

Dec 2nd 2012: Sermon on the Mount #8: Matthew 7:1-6
"Jesus Talks About Judging"

You may have noticed in the Participaper today that in the comments I make there about this message, I refer to Matthew 7:1 as a verse that is quite well known and well used by many non-church people. I myself have at times been warned by non-churched people to judge not, lest I too be judged, and perhaps you have too.

I must say that I have also used it to suggest to others that they are unfair in judging another harshly and, in later years, often mumbled it under my breath to myself, to try to stop myself being unfairly critical of another.

The fact of the matter is that hasty, unfair, or even harsh and uncalled for judging of others seems to be a fault that most human beings seem to suffer from, and unfortunately Christians, or religious people, often lead the way.

That I'm sure is why Jesus raised the subject of judging in His sermon, for in His day it was the religious people.....the Pharisees.....who had a name for being judgmental of others, and Jesus needed His followers to be seen as different to them in that area.

And it's a different that the Lord still demands from His people today and He still calls us to follow closely the instructions that He gives about judging others.

And we definitely need to hear them, for I would reckon that all of us have fallen into the trap of jumping to the wrong conclusion about someone because of a too hasty judgment of them on our part.

Like the story of the woman at the airport.....

To fully understand what Jesus is saying here though, we must discern what the verb to judge actually means, and also be careful to consider His words in the light of the context. And when we do that we realize straight away that judging is not necessary a negative action. Someone judging a cake competition for instance is not setting out to find the worst cake maker and vilify them, but to find the best and honour them, while encouraging those who don't quite get there in the efforts they have made.

Even a Judge presiding over a court case seeks to be neither negative or positive is his approach. His aim is to assess the evidence before him and

make an informed judgment which may be either in favour of, or against the accused, on the basis of such an assessment.

Indeed the dictionary defines judgment as assessing the qualities of something or someone, or forming an opinion of somebody or something, especially after thought or consideration.

Consequently to suggest from our text that Jesus is forbidding all kinds of judging would be ridiculous. Indeed He encourages us in v6 to make judgments about who we share the sacred things about God with, for if we judge that the reaction is so bad that the sacred message is in danger of being used in an evil way, then we need to know when to hold back and wait for a better time or place, or simply to cease altogether.

Again in verses 15-20 Jesus encourages His followers to watch out for false prophets and to make judgments about them on the basis of the fruit. Twice He tells them that "By their fruit you will recognize them", obviously calling them to make judgments about those that come to them as teachers and prophets in the name of the Lord, for such judging is both necessary and for the good of the body of believers.

So it becomes clear that the judging referred to in verse 1 is a particular type of judging that is both negative and unproductive. J B Phillips calls this selective type of judging 'criticism' in his paraphrase of this text:

7¹⁻² "Don't criticise people, and you will not be criticised. For you will be judged by the way you criticise others, and the measure you give will be the measure you receive."

Such a word as criticism has a heap of negative connotations about it. The dictionary defines it as:-

***disparaging
disapproving
nit-picking
judgmental
unsympathetic
derogatory
fault-finding***

But despite the harshness of its meaning, it is the word criticize which fits best with the type of judging that Jesus forbids. as shown by the example of such judging that He gives in v3-5

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

The word that screams out at me is the word 'hypocrite'. A word that Jesus used often to describe the religious leaders of the day who so quickly criticized others in order to prove how good and perfect they were, and yet were themselves arrogant and proud and sinful in the sight of God. A fact they chose not to see or deal with.

They adopted an approach that suggested that seeing they were the guardians of God's law, and the chief interpreters of it, they could correct others who strayed from it. Their intent was not to help the brother but to point out his failings before others.

And Jesus, who knew the way they acted and their motives, and even knew their hearts before God, recognized their need to look first within their own hearts and deal humbly with them before God, and then they would be in the right place to help their brother with his weakness as a fellow sinner. Not to judge or to criticize, but to lovingly advise in order to build them up.

Perhaps a good exercise for us to try next time we are tempted to criticize another is to consider what our purpose is behind the criticism. Is it to help the person or to denigrate them like the Pharisees did in order to make us look better.

The parallel passage to this one in Luke 6:37-38 adds an alternative suggestion: J B Phillips puts it like this:

"Don't judge other people and you will not be judged yourselves. Don't condemn and you will not be condemned. Make allowances for others and people will make allowances for you. Give and men will give to you—yes, good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over will they pour into your lap. For whatever measure you use with other people, they will use in their dealings with you."

Instead of judging we should be making allowances for others, particular in the light of the allowances God daily makes for us. And we should be giving to them love, forgiveness, understanding, support; all things that God gives us though we don't deserve them; and God promises us a blessing from others in return.

There's a true story told of a young man who attended a University in America that happened to be close to a very strong evangelical church. Many of the students attended this church on a Sunday and during the week and were attracted by its strong Bible based teaching and the reverence before God they encountered there. The young man mentioned was a bit way out in his views and his dress. Not a church goer he had laughed at invites he had received from others to attend that church.

But one Sunday he felt led to attend. He got there late and the place was crowded. This didn't worry this young man who was a bit of an exhibitionist anyhow, and he walked right to the front of the church and sat on the floor directly in front of the pulpit. All who saw him could not fail to notice his rather casual and scruffy appearance, compared to everyone else, but the thing that stood out most was his lack of footwear.

What happened next had a greater impact on that young man and on that congregation than any sermon. For one of the church elders, seeing the young man walk in, followed him down the aisle. He was quite old and slow. Restricted in his movement by the impact of age on joints and muscles. When he finally reached the young man, the elder said nothing to him. He simply, yet laboriously, lowered himself to the floor and sat there alongside him.

Others no doubt saw the young man and judged him in their thinking. Some may have spoken their thoughts about him in a critical way, to him or to others about him. The old man looked at him through the eyes of Jesus and he saw past the things he could so easily criticize to a person who, just like Himself, needed the loving touch of Jesus. And in some way he sought to facilitate that and in doing so, surely he did, what was pleasing to his Saviour.

I recognize my need to pay more attention to this verse because I know I am far from guiltless when it comes to unfair and harsh judging of others. And I also know that I don't like it when I am on the receiving end. But mainly I realize from God's Word that unfair and unthinking criticism helps no one and instead is used greatly by the evil one. While on the contrary, a kind and loving approach to all can lead to a fellowship in Christ that honours Him, and builds up His Body.

