

“The Theology of Planks and Specks”

Matthew 7:1-5

June 2, 2002

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It was on a Sunday morning. He came up to me after the services and asked, “Pastor, have you ever visited Cherry Hills Community Church?”

Without waiting for my answer he went on saying, “We visited there last weekend. What a church, **they** must really be doing something **right**?”

Now first of all the timing of his remarks was a little off.

Attendance at Southern Gables was noticeably down that morning and I didn't feel very good about the sermon.

But I went along as if I was as enthused, at that moment, about Cherry Hills' success as he was.

So smiling I said, “Yes, isn't it great what has happened?”

But then unable to help myself I added, “The advantage of being in the right place at the right time with enough money certainly makes a difference doesn't it?”

What was that about?

Why did I have to add that?

I heard in his remarks that Cherry Hills was doing it right and we had a lot to learn from them and that Pastor Jim Dixon is really competent in comparison to my mediocrity.

In my defensiveness I passed judgment on Cherry Hills' success as merely the result of luck and money.

Have you ever done that kind of thing?

I have caught myself bringing up some negative situation about someone else's life largely to elicit from the person I'm talking to some further negative comment about that other person.

I think I did it to lend support to my negative judgment of the person.

Confirming my rightness, and the other's wrongness.

Have you ever done that kind of thing?

I have a neighbor who is loud, vile-tongued, and verbally abusive to his family.

My tendency is to stay away, write him off, and expect the worst from him.

Every time the sounds of his abusive language waft into my yard it only reconfirms my judgment of him.

Have you ever done that?

Matthew 7:1-5 “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. “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.

Here, in our continuing study of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives a command: “Do not judge...”

Secondly, he gives a reason for the command: “...or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Thirdly, he gives an illustration by analogy: “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?”

And lastly, he gives a solution: “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.

First, the command: “Do not judge...”

One of the worst charges that can be made against us in our culture is that we are judgmental.

If you believe certain lifestyles or actions are morally wrong then you are judgmental.

If you dare to hint that living together without being married is wrong, you are being judgmental.

The only lifestyle that our culture condemns is a judgmental lifestyle.

In fact if you voice an opinion of criticism of any particular lifestyle, even the biblically illiterate will use Jesus' words against you by saying, “Didn't Jesus say not to judge?”

Even among Christians Jesus' words will be used this broadly.

You venture an opinion that your friend should probably not be getting divorced and someone will remind you not to judge.

Is that what Jesus means here?

- Are you supposed to suspend all believe about right and wrong?
- Are you to be blind and deaf to all actions?
- Are you to be a non-discriminating, non-discerning, accepting everything, non-thinker?

No, that cannot be what he means for Jesus himself in Matthew 7:15 speaks of others as wolves in sheep's clothing.

He has clearly identified certain conduct and even labeled it.

In Philippians 3:2 the Apostle Paul says to watch out for those dogs who are false teachers.

Paul himself said of one man in 1 Corinthians 5:3, “And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present.”

When Jesus said we are not to judge, he was **not** saying we are to suspend all moral judgment about right and wrong.

Clearly Christians are to be observant, discerning, discriminating, thoughtful people.

Jesus said in Matthew 10:16 “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

When Jesus challenged the Pharisees who brought the adulterous woman to him he was not saying her lifestyle is her business alone and you judgmental people have no right to concern yourselves with that.

He was not saying adultery is a relative moral value but he was challenging the way the Pharisees thought.

He was challenging the assumptions they were making about themselves especially in comparison to the woman.

We are told to be discerning but not damning.

The judgment we are told to suspend is the judgment of condemnation.

Judging is fault-finding – quickly noticing and even looking for the negative.

Judging is to put the worst possible motive on others’ actions and being ungenerous toward their mistakes.

There is a deeply rooted human tendency to judge others.

A carload of black-clothed white teenagers is driving slowly around a black neighborhood or a group of black teenaged boys is loitering in a white neighborhood.

Judgment: They’re bad and dangerous.

A swarthy-skinned Middle Eastern-featured man boards the airplane and sits in the very back row of a half-empty plane.

Judgment: He’s dangerous.

Your waiter stands before you with earrings in both ears, a limp wrist, pale complexion and a higher than normal pitch to his voice.

Judgment: He’s homosexual and he has AIDS.

A woman walks into Sunday School with a neckline that’s a little too low and a skirt that’s a little too tight.

Judgment: She's loose.

You learn that your daughter is hanging out with the kid down the block whose father is perpetually unemployed and whose mother is absent.

Judgment: He's white trash.

You find out that your new neighbors are active Mormons.

Judgment: They're enemies of the faith.

You're about to go into business with a man when you discover that he had filed bankruptcy several years earlier.

Judgment: He's irresponsible.

You confided a weakness to your best friend who promptly told someone else.

Judgment: She can't be trusted.

Someone in your small Bible study group "goes on" about the great weekend they had gambling in Las Vegas.

Judgment: He's an immature Christian.

The preacher spoke against homosexual practice.

Judgment: He's homophobic.

Someone doesn't say hello to us in the hallway.

Judgment: They're angry with me and so I'm angry with them.

Your child gets hurt playing at the neighbors'.

Judgment: the adults are irresponsible and the neighbor kid is a bully.

A family at church has decided to not have television in their home.

Judgment: They're weird and out of touch with reality.

You spot your Bible study leader hoisting a cold one at a Rockies game.

Judgment: Not fit for leadership in the church.

You learn that your Bible study leader is a teetotaler.

Judgment: He's a judgmental fundamentalist.

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus places great emphasis on relationships.

For the glory of the Father and the good of humanity, no one desired the Kingdom of God to expand more than Jesus.

And Jesus made it very clear that **the Kingdom of God expands** not by sword but **by relationships** – our relationship with God and with others.

Look at the kinds of issues he deals with in the sermon.

They are all about relationships: anger, lust, and desire for revenge, forgiveness, reconciliation, truthfulness, loyalty, among other things.

Nothing will destroy individuals and the church or impede the advancement of the Kingdom of God faster or more insidiously than broken relationships.

Heresy and immorality are deadly enemies of the community of faith **but no more deadly** than personal judgment of others.

When we judge another person in the way Jesus prohibits, what are we doing?

We are drawing **a conclusion** and drawing **a line**.

We draw **a conclusion that they are different** and we draw **a line that excludes them from us**.

We see **something** worthy of condemnation and we turn it into **someone** worthy of condemnation and thus worthy of hurt.

And we administer the hurt.

We set ourselves up as judge and jury.

We put ourselves in God's place.

Someone wrote, "All human judgment has a touch of egoism. When I judge I put myself above the other person and imagine that I am better than he is. This is the secret Pharisaism that dwells by nature in the judge. In judging I elevate myself and seek to put the other person down. And therefore the judgment never helps him, but only embitters him. He often feels (from our judging) that he is being

subjected not to justice but rather to the egoism and self-(righteousness) of the one who is judging.” (Thielicke 151)

But what if we don't condemn some things, won't that lead to a lawless, immoral, world?

Don't I have an obligation to call a spade a spade?

Fredrick Bruner wrote, “We sometimes think we have the responsibility to disburse disesteem in the measure we feel people deserve, and we think these disbursements contribute to social equilibrium and justice. (We assume that) with signs of disapproval the wayward are chastened. But this command tells us to beware of our calculus.” (Bruner 273)

Is it at least interesting to you how Jesus treated the common sinner of his day compared to the way he treated the hypocritical religious sinners?

When dealing with common sinners, Jesus rarely found it necessary to point out the obvious.

It was his obvious **love** for them, in spite of their sin, **that made their sin** and their need for a Savior **all the more obvious** to them.

I think Dietrich Bonhoeffer nailed it when he wrote: “The disciples of Christ are to love unconditionally. Thus they may effect what their own...conditionally offered love never could achieve, namely the radical condemnation of sin... If I withhold my judgment I am not confirming the other person in his bad ways. Neither I am right nor the other person, but God is always right and shall proclaim both his grace and his righteousness.” (Bonhoeffer 205)

Judgment is reserved for God and those he places in authority in the home, the church and the government—even though such judgment is carried out very carefully!

For the rest of us, Jesus commands, “Don't judge!”

We are called to live justly but not to dispense justice.

Romans 12:17-19, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take

revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

Secondly, Jesus gives a reason for the command: "Don't judge or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Is this just the prudent, practical and worthy advice that we should model a benevolent attitude toward others because that is how we wish to be treated?

Is Jesus advice simply that if we don't gossip or criticize or otherwise judge people negatively then we won't be gossiped about or criticized?

No, his rationale is much stronger than that.

God's judgment of us is behind Jesus' words.

We are not to live in the delusion that God forgives us when we don't forgive others.

Jesus says how we treat others is tied to the way God treats us.

Matthew 5:7 Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

6:12 "“Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

18:35 “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

Our standing before God in the final judgment will be related to our relationship with others.

From Scripture I know that truth cannot contradict the fact that God's forgiveness of us is free and unconditional but at the same time I cannot contradict Jesus' words about the connection of the one with the other.

Our response to others indicates the extent to which we are protective of our own rights and vindictive or are open to and have experienced God's mercy and forgiveness of us.

To condemn another means we are acting contrary to forgiveness and mercy and thus we have no claim to forgiveness and mercy at the last judgment.

Those who have appropriated God's forgiveness, offer it to others. And those who don't offer it to others, apparently haven't appropriated God's forgiveness of themselves.

Here's the way the Apostle Paul said it in Romans 14:10-13: "You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written:

" `As surely as I live,' says the Lord,
 `every knee will bow before me;
 every tongue will confess to God.' "

So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.

We don't earn God's forgiveness by our forgiveness of others, but our forgiveness of others is an indication of our experience of forgiveness by God.

If we find that our tendency is to judge others, condemning in our attitude, we may wish to look first at our own understanding of and acceptance of God's forgiveness of us.

Now the Third thing I see in Jesus words is an illustration by analogy: "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? ⁴ 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?

If a professional illustrator drew a sketch of this analogy it would look truly comical.

Here's the one guy with a plank sticking out of his eye looking through a microscope to find a miniscule speck in another person's eye.

You can imagine people laughing at this point in Jesus' sermon. They understand the exaggeration to make his point.

How ludicrous for a giant Sequoia to be teaching a dandelion how to be low profile (Bruner 274)

How ridiculous for us sinners to be condemning other sinners.

But Jesus **doesn't just** mean, "he who is without sin cast the first stone".

He **doesn't simply** mean that we are all sinners in some degree.

He means that self-righteous condemnation (judging) is the very sin that forms the "plank" in our own eye.

He is saying that we have no right to compare ourselves to another, to see their sins as worse than any we have committed.

In fact if there is a "worst" sin, it is the sin of judging.

Listen to Jesus words in Luke 18:9-14:

"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Look how Jesus prefaced the story: **"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else..."**

It is that self-righteous condemnation of others that Jesus is talking about in the text today.

We have a huge capacity for self-deception.

We tend to minimize the **contributions** of others and maximize our own.

We tend to maximize the **faults** of others and minimize our own.

We tend to **discredit** others because of some deficiency we perceive while we overlook our own deficiencies.

A censorious spirit is a cheap way of attaining moral superiority.

The perversion of our assessment may not be so much that we have misjudged the other person but that we have so greatly misjudged ourselves.

There **may in fact be** a speck in the other's eye **but our** problem is that we overlooked the plank in our own.

And it is not enough to say, "Oh, I know none of us is perfect but..."

I wish to repeat something I said earlier.

When Jesus challenged the Pharisees who brought the adulterous woman to him he was **not** saying her lifestyle was her business alone and you judgmental people have no right to concern yourselves with that.

He was **not** saying adultery is a relative moral value **but he was** **challenging the thinking of the Pharisees.**

He was challenging the assumptions they were making about themselves especially in comparison to the woman.

Jesus used the opportunity first and most to help the Pharisees shine a light **on their self-perceptions** – they saw themselves as righteous, as better than, as without that sin, and their attitude toward the woman was not of mercy and love but of judgment.

A proper attitude toward others begins with a proper assessment of ourselves.

We are sinners saved by grace.

Helmut Thielicke wrote, "The truth is that in discipleship..., a Christian grows ever more compassionate, because he learns to know his own heart ever more deeply and because under the power of forgiveness he also grows ever more free and courageous to see himself as he is without any illusions about himself." (Thielicke 157-8)

Lastly in Jesus words, he gives an alternative to the judging, condemning attitudes and actions that come so naturally to us:

“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.

I personally **don't** think this is a text for how to administer discipline to another.

I **don't** think this is written to show us how to judge properly or how to hold someone else accountable for his or her actions.

I **do** think that the emphasis in the text is so strongly on the point of not judging that **the emphasis here is on “taking the plank out of your own eye” and not on “removing the speck from your brother’s eye.”**

What does it mean to “take the plank out of my own eye”?

Here is where I think Jesus is implying an alternative to the judging, condemning spirit that comes so easily to us.

Earlier I asked, “Is it at least interesting to you how Jesus treated the common sinner of his day?”

Whether it was Peter or the woman at the well or Nicodemus or the woman caught in adultery, even if Jesus confronted them, he did it in a way that left them knowing they were loved.

John 8:3-11 “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus

was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "When we judge people we confront them in a spirit of detachment, observing and reflecting as it were from the outside. But love has neither time nor opportunity for this. If we love, we can never observe the other person with detachment, for he is always and at every moment a living claim to our love and service."

(Bonhoeffer 204)

The Apostle Paul said it this way in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

"Do not judge – take the plank out of your own eye."