

Sermon on the Mount #10

Jesus on judging

w/c 2 July 2023

"We should be rigorous in judging ourselves and gracious in judging others." (John Wesley)

Read Matthew 7:1–6

This whole section reminds us of the Jewish use of hyperbole in both its writing and teaching. On the surface, Jesus tells us *not* to judge and immediately follows this with teaching as to *how* we should judge. This is therefore not about becoming overly innocent, walking the world and accepting everything. The Message captures the tone rather well...

"Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults – unless, of course, you want the same treatment. That critical spirit has a way of boomeranging. It's easy to see a smudge on your neighbour's face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own."

The overall biblical response is surely to *"make a right judgement"* (John 7:24), or as Paul puts it, *"The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things"* (1 Corinthians 2:15). In his second letter to that church, Paul notes (2 Corinthians 13:5) that the subject of such judgement perhaps ought to be ourselves. Writing to the church in Philippi, Paul is anxious that they learn to *"discern what is best"* (ch1v10). We can match this with Matthew 18:15ff where Jesus expects his followers to evaluate the actions of others in the church community. How can we achieve such discernment without descending into judgementalism?

Looking at the shape of the whole sermon, these verses introduce a section which concludes with the so-called golden rule: *"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."* (v12). Interestingly, this is not a specifically Christian thought – the Jewish scholar Hillel the Elder, active in the late first-century BC, had written: *"That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah..."* Similar thoughts can also be found in the writings of Greek and Chinese thinkers. How can we exercise the right kind of judgement to make this happen?

One could even say that the church's current problem is not that it has judged too much but rather that, in some areas, it has not judged enough. If our calling as Christians is biblically to exercise right judgement and to support the poor and oppressed, why do we so infrequently hear comments from Christians about things in our country such as:

- the oft exploitative gig- economy
- an approach to asylum seekers described by Justin Welby as "morally unacceptable".
- so many tax and economic changes over the last dozen years or so which have simply served to transfer money to the rich from the poor.

Why is the church so often silent?

It's all too easy to forget that the message of verse 5 is that we are help remove the speck from our brother's eye. It's not that we don't do it, but rather that we sort out our own issues first. How do we determine when our own eye is 'plank free'?

In writing to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 2:12–14) Paul talks about how those without the Spirit consider things from the Spirit to be foolishness. How do you think this relates to Jesus' talk of sacred things and pearls, of dogs and pigs? What might be an equivalent set of contrasts for today? These verses have often been interpreted to mean that we should not continue to offer the gospel to those who have 'decisively' rejected the good news. How could we determine when this might be appropriate?

"If you judge people, you have no time to love them." (Mother Teresa)