

Judge not

“Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured unto you.” (Mt 7:1) These familiar words from Jesus Christ refer to the completely ordinary habit of inwardly criticizing others. Have you noticed how often people like to give the benefit of their opinion? And usually, those opinions shared are negative and critical? A while back I was dressing out at the gym. On the TV in the locker room was playing the broadcast of a golf tournament. Another man whom I had not met before was also in the locker room. In an effort to break the silence, I made a comment, in an altogether too familiar judgmental way, referring to the golfers on TV, “What a waste of a life—to be a professional golfer. I mean, what good are they doing this world?” The other man didn’t say anything. A couple minutes later I asked him what he did for a living. “I’m a golf pro,” he said. I couldn’t believe it. Silence descended again.

I wish I could say that was one of the few times I have embarrassed myself making critical comments. But you can probably guess it was not. And Jesus’ constant teaching is that the words coming forth from us simply reflect what is in our heart. To refrain from speaking in critical, condemning, and judgment ways, we have to become the kind of generous-spirited, charitable person who hardly ever notices, and simply doesn’t dwell on the faults and failures of others. Lord, help me!

But that is the point. For me to stop saying critical, contemptuous things, I have to change on the inside, so that I become the kind of person who finds it difficult to judge others and actually prefers to say praiseworthy things. For that to happen, I literally need God to do a miracle of re-creation within. And that is exactly what our discipleship to Jesus can bring about. There is no



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contempt in the kingdom of God. Our Lord won’t have it. God does not have a critical spirit or judgmental attitude. There is not a contemptuous bone in His body. He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. (Lk 6:35) It is the kindness of God that leads us to repentance. (Rom 2:4) He alone knows the real truth about us as individuals. He knows that we are both better and worse than other people think us to be. He is not fooled by our outward “righteousness” that is only a cover-up for malice. Nor is He shocked or appalled by our sins. God so loved this world that He sent His only Son that whosoever trusts in Him will not perish but receive kingdom life. Certainly God reserves the right for and has promised a Day of Judgment. That day will come. “Each one of us will give an account of himself to God.” (Rom 14:12) But in terms of His character, the Bible is very clear that the God who made this universe is “a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.” (Ps 86:15)

Therefore, there is absolutely no reason for followers of Jesus to assume that it is our job to “straighten out” other people. That is God’s job. Certainly we speak truth to one another—but only in love. Otherwise, we should just keep our mouth shut. Seriously. Truth spoken without love is often a tool of Satan. The devil easily uses truth to harm and condemn and unfortunately, most of us have been his tool that way towards others at times, especially in

our own family. Being truthful is important. But it is not the greatest virtue. Manifesting divine love is the greatest virtue. And sometimes love would just have us keep quiet.

Now, if we have a God-given position to train others, as a parent, teacher, coach, pastor, or supervisor at work, then clearly our job at times will involve the correction, discipline, and re-training of other human beings. But the Spirit with which we correct others makes all the difference. Many of us have been victims of “constructive criticism.” If it is our job to correct others, it must be done in a spirit of gentleness. It is often believed that you cannot correct others and hold them accountable unless you are mean about it, or at least angry. Not so. Jesus Christ holds us accountable and can be incredibly firm—but He is also gentle with us. His personality is the one we are adopting.

One of my jobs as a high school teacher is to periodically have a week of “lunch duty.” Teachers are placed in strategic positions around the campus to keep the kids who are at lunch from wandering around and getting into trouble and disrupting other classes. My classroom is one of the trailers behind the school. Earlier this year, on a Tuesday, I heard a bunch of kids making a racket during lunch out by the trailers. With some real anger, I thought to myself, “Why can’t that teacher keep those kids from wandering back here?” Then it dawned on me. That was me! I was the teacher who was supposed to be on duty that week—and I had forgotten and already missed Monday!

Jesus Christ makes clear the absolute truth: to the extent we judge others, we too will be judged. Ultimately, we will all have to judge ourselves before God. “Every knee will bow before Me, every tongue will confess to God.” (Rom 14:11) Knowing now, as followers of Jesus, that we have received mercy, so

too we have it within us (the living Lord Jesus) to extend mercy to others. But becoming a non-judgmental person does not come naturally. It will not happen just by trying. Nor will it be easy. But there are discernible steps used by the Holy Spirit.

First, He breaks our pride. Typically, the Lord allows us to be brought so low that we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are the tender objects of mercy, not justice. This shattering realization then enables us to treat others with patience and kindness. The Apostle Peter, in my opinion, probably needed the experience of denying his Lord. Without the humiliation of that “breaking,” my guess is that he would have been pretty hard on fellow believers. I doubt seriously that Peter found it easy to condemn others after that.

Second, the Lord enlarges our capacity to see the wideness of His kingdom power. We gradually come to understand that He really is in control, even when we are faced with flagrant violations of decency and goodness. God has not been asleep nor is He taken by surprise. He has reserved the wicked for a day of justice. “The Lord works out everything for his own ends— even the wicked for a day of disaster.” (Proverbs 16:4)

Third, the Lord trains us (through many failures) to realize that if others do not do what we wish them to do for us, God will still make sure that we are taken care of. If you read the “do not judge” passage in the Sermon on the Mount carefully (Mt 7:1-12), you will discover that it ends with Jesus’ teaching about the “Golden Rule”: “All things therefore whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them: for this is the law and the prophets.” In other words, Jesus’ teaching about “not judging” has to do primarily with the irritation, aggravation, and wounded sense of pride we often feel when we don’t get our way with others! As the “injured party” our usual response is to criticize, condemn, and judge those who let us down. Jesus would say to us, “Let it go. I will give you what you need, or the

grace to do without. Instead of striving to get others to meet your needs (and then being offended when they don’t), trust God, and spend your energy doing good for them. In doing so, you will share ever more deeply with Me. So be at peace.”

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