

The Problem with Judgment

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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The fourth in the Lenten sermon series on Love.

Text: Matthew 7:1 “Judge not, that you be not judged.” ~Jesus

This week those of you with Tom Holladay’s book are reading about the problem of judgment in loving relationships. It was first odd to me that the author made so much to do about judgment, after all what does that have to do with love? But the more I read and thought about it, the more this issue is right at the heart of our struggle to be more loving. Paul wrote, “*Love keeps no record of the wrongs of others.*”¹ What is judgment if it is not keeping a record of wrongs done to us? Love keeps no record of wrongs.

Then there is in the Sermon on the Mount the oft-quoted statement by Jesus: “*Judge not, that you be not judged.*”² It is one of the most popular teachings of Jesus but it is also one of the least understood. Did he mean we should not make moral judgments? That seems unlikely, given almost every other verse in the Sermon on the Mount lays out an extremely exacting moral code. Jesus was quick to tell disciples how we should live and how far we miss the mark. Moderns equate judgmentalism with intolerance. Is ‘judge not’ an appeal to be tolerant and accepting of other people regardless of their moral choices? You may remember that when we began this series of loving more like Jesus that I told you:

The current fascination with diversity and multiculturalism calling on us to tolerate other people and accept them for what they are may not be enough for Christians. I don’t think being tolerant is what Jesus meant by loving our neighbors. Didn’t he call on us to do more than tolerate and accept people? What does it mean to *love* them?

Whatever Jesus meant by ‘judging not,’ I suspect it is right at the heart of the issue of how we can learn and practice love for other people, especially neighbors who get under our skin.

Holladay turns us straight to the Sermon on the Mount to look at Jesus’ teaching on judging. He concludes immediately that Jesus was not preaching moral relativism.³ If anything,

¹ 1Corinthians 13:5.

² Matthew 7:1.

³ Holladay, Tom. The Relationship Principles of Jesus. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 197.

Jesus advocated for his disciples a stricter moral code than even the scribes and Pharisees,⁴ certainly stricter than the worldly values of 21st Century America. Holladay notes that in this teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made three points to explain his prescription against judgmentalism. ‘*Judging not*’ is about hypocrisy, integrity and mercy.

- (1) Do not say one thing and do another; in other words do not be a *hypocrite*. This is contained in Jesus’ language about seeing the speck in your neighbor’s eye while there is a plank in your own. You must apply the same standard to yourself as you do to others.
- (2) Judge yourself before applying judgment to others. This is *integrity*. Be willing to make changes in yourself before you try to fix someone else. You must do more than just *know* that you have a plank in your eye—you have to do something about it. This is what it means to have *integrity*.
- (3) And give other people the same degree of understanding, grace and forgiveness that God gives you. In other words, show *mercy*. Approach other people with humility, knowing that you have had to be forgiven many things, too.⁵

Now this last part—mercy—is crucial to what Jesus taught. Holladay writes:

We live in a society that believes the opposite of judgment is tolerance. And tolerance is falsely defined as accepting without opinion or comment whatever choices another makes. But Jesus told us the alternative to judgment is not tolerance; it is mercy. The alternative to being judgmental is not ignoring other people’s faults; *it is showing that Jesus has forgiven all our faults*.... It means we don’t see anyone as outside the circle of God’s grace, as beyond the bounds of our forgiveness, as outside the limits of our love.⁶

If we really understand what we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, that we are forgiven our sins as we forgive the sins of others, it will make us much, much more merciful, much less judgmental, much, much more loving. St. Paul wrote:

God has chosen you and made you his holy people. He loves you. So always do these things: show mercy to others, be kind, humble, gentle and patient. Get along with each other, and forgive each other. If someone does wrong to you, forgive that person because the Lord forgave you.⁷

⁴ Matthew 5:17-20, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”(!)

⁵ Holladay, *op cit*, 198.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 213-214. Italics mine.

⁷ Colossians 3:12-13 (NCV).

A secret of loving others is grasping how much God loves us, how much God has forgiven us, how much God is merciful to us. When we understand those things, it frees us to love others without reservation. This is another way of saying that to love others we must stop judging.

The awareness of God's action in our own lives frees us to from the need to judge and allows us to leave judgment to God. If we know that things will be worked out by God in the future, it frees us to love people in the present, without feeling an obligation to straighten out all their flaws. Jesus' story about the wheat and the weeds growing in the same field until the final harvest is precisely about this point.⁸ If we uproot the weeds before the harvest, we will damage some of the good stuff.

Holladay makes a final point about judgmentalism and forgiveness and the effect both have on our attempts to love. Being merciful to those who wrong us is tremendously empowering. Forgiveness changes us and then the change in us propels change in the person we try to love. One of the greatest stories of this is Corrie ten Boom, the author of The Hiding Place. You may remember the movie or her books. Her Dutch family suffered in a concentration camp during World War II because they hid in their house Jewish families fleeing the Nazis. When the ten Booms were finally discovered by the SS, they were sent to Ravensbrück, where her sister died by deprivation and torture. The ten Booms were devout Christians and following the war, Miss ten Boom toured Europe and the United States telling her story and testifying to the power of God in her life that led her family to try to save Jews and also to accept the consequences. By the time I heard her, she was an elderly lady. She spoke meekly, but I sensed this was one tough Christian, who had not only the courage of her convictions, but also the scars to back up our creed. In one book she told the story of meeting after the war one of the Ravensbrück guards in a Munich church where she had lectured about her faith.⁹ It was in 1947. She had just finished speaking about the power of God's forgiveness and as people filed out, this fellow came up to her. Immediately she recognized him, although he did not seem to recognize her. She had referred to Ravensbrück in her testimony, and he told her he had been a guard there. He told her he had become a Christian after the war but was still tormented with guilt for his past at the camp. "Did she think God could forgive him?" he asked her. As he talked, she remembered that when she and her sister arrived at the camp, they had to strip off their clothes, place them in the pile and then march by the guards naked to get camp uniforms. This guard was one of the cruelest. Miss ten Boom could barely speak to the man before her. He offered her his hand and asked could she forgive him, too? Her blood ran cold. "I stood there," she wrote, "I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven—and could not forgive. [My sister] Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for asking?" She wrestled with her conscience, her memory and faith, knowing she had to do it but unable to do so. The farthest

⁸ Matthew 13:29-30.

⁹ Ten Boom, Corrie. Tramp for the Lord. (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1974), 55-57. Quoted by Holladay, *op cit.*, 231-233.

thing from reality that she felt was forgiveness for this fellow. So she prayed quietly, “Jesus, help me! I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.” Woodenly, she lifted her hand to his and a strange thing took place. Not so much emotional as physical, a current started in her shoulder and raced down her arm and sprang into their joined hands. Warmth is what she felt and then tears. “I forgive you, brother!” she cried, “with all my heart.” She said she had never known the intensity of God’s love so strongly until that moment.

The power to love is intimately connected with finding a way to forgive, not to judge. As with Miss ten Boom, very often it is only possible through prayer. It is an interesting providence of God, that the lectionary text this morning is the well-known gospel of God’s love in John 3:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.¹⁰

It is in the discovery of the overwhelming, life-changing love of God in Jesus that we glimpse the love that is asked of us. Love is predicated not on judgment or condemnation, but rather on forgiveness and mercy. It is so for us. It will also always be so for those we attempt to love.

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¹⁰ John 3:16-17.