

The Speck and the Log

Eric C. Coher

Matthew 7:1-5

Our text this morning is one of the most well-known, but perhaps one of the most misunderstood and abused verses in the Bible. It has frequently been stripped from its contextual limitations and misapplied. People who know very little of the Bible are familiar with Jesus' words, "Judge not," and they keep it locked, loaded, and ready to fire.

A harsh, critical, judgmental spirit is endemic to the human condition. It's part and parcel of the Genesis 3, fallen world we live in. We see it glamorized on the big screen, it's pervasive in mainstream media as a tactic for discrediting or demoralizing a person, it's widespread in the workplace, and it's plastered all over our social media feeds. A critical and judgmental spirit isn't absent on the playground, in the break room, at the play date, within groups of neighbors, or unfortunately, even in the halls at church. A harsh, critical spirit is not a spiritual gift. It's been said, "If the devil isn't able to destroy a Christian's witness by making him apathetic, he will try and do it by making him a fanatic."¹

The story is told of a young bachelor who brought a young lady home to meet his parents. It was a disaster. The only words the young man's mother could seem to find were unmercifully critical. Frustrated, and at the end of his rope, a friend offered this advice: "Find someone just like your mother." Wondering if this would solve the problem, he searched high and low for a young lady that mirrored his mom. At last he found a young lady that looked like his mother, walked like his mother, talked like his mother, and even thought like his mother. "This for sure will be the one," he thought to himself, so he took her home. Not long after, the friend who had offered the advice asked how his mother liked the new young lady. He replied, "My mother loved her, but my father couldn't stand her."²

Let's turn our attention to our text for this morning. Let me encourage you to stand, if you have the ability. Matthew, recording Jesus' teaching, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, pens the following words:

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1972), 224.

² R. Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 231.

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. Matthew 7:1-5

Brothers and sisters, "The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever" Isaiah 40:8.

I. JESUS CALLS OUT OUR SINFUL JUDGMENTAL SPIRIT (v.1-2)

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

I speak for myself when I say to never judge anyone is perhaps one of the most difficult things in the world to accomplish. Our self-righteous, prideful radar is ever sweeping the landscape to pick up the faintest indication of fault in others.

What does Jesus mean when he says, "Judge not"? Is he saying we should never make judgments? Think for a moment about what the world would look like if it were devoid of any judgments. It would be an absolute train wreck. The civil arena, moral arena, financial arena, judicial arena, and the commercial arena would all implode. The word translated "judge" is the Greek verb (κρίνω - krino). It means to separate, choose, decide, select, determine, conclude, think, or call into question. It has varied shades of meaning that must be decided from the context. To absolutize Jesus' words that it is never right to judge would be an impossible interpretation given the myriad of biblical texts that tell us that we must make judgments. Let's look at a few of those texts:

Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you. Matthew 7:5-6

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Matthew 7:15-16

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Matthew 18:15-17

Woe to you hypocrites (v. 13, 23, 25, 27, 29)... Woe to you blind guides (v. 16)... Matthew 23

Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment. John 7:24

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. 1 John 4:1

These verses make it clear that we as Christians have an obligation to exercise judgment. We are to use sound judgment in matters of truth. The entire thrust of the Sermon on the Mount is to show the complete distinction between true religion and false religion, between spiritual truth and spiritual hypocrisy. Jesus places God's perfect and holy standards beside the unholy and self-righteous standards of the scribes and Pharisees, and declares that those who follow those unholy and self-righteous standards have no part in God's kingdom (5:20). No more controversial or judgmental sermon has ever been preached.³

Every message we hear from this pulpit, or any other pulpit, is to be judged for the soundness of its doctrine. Paul told the Galatians, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed" Galatians 1:8. Similarly, John writes, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works" 2 John 1:10-11.

When Jesus says, "Judge not," He's not telling us to turn off our discernment. Rather, He is condemning the pull of our sinful hearts toward a critical and intentional fault-finding spirit. Jesus is referring to the judgment of motives, which no mere human being can know of another. God says of Himself, through the Prophet Jeremiah, "I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds" Jeremiah 17:10.

Jesus is putting His finger on our propensity to blame others for trifling offenses or matters of indifference, passing harsh and hasty judgments, and our disposition to magnify the errors and infirmities of others while excusing our own. As believers, we should "believe all things," and "hope all things" about others and be very slow to find fault (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:7). In other words, we, of all people, because of the incalculable grace shown to us, should be quick to give the benefit of the doubt and assume the best in others. There is a major difference between being discerningly critical and hypercritical, between exercising sound discernment and being judgmental. A discerning spirit is constructive while a hypercritical spirit is destructive. Let's look at a portrait of a hypercritical person:

³ John MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 431.

PORTRAIT OF A HYPERCRITICAL PERSON

1. Searches for faults in others.

James Montgomery Boice notes, "Does such criticism arise because there is a profound grief over sin? Is the critic moved by the fact that God is outraged and that great wrong is done? All too often the critic has no sensitivity for sin at all. If his accusations of his neighbor are discovered to be false, and the neighbor is innocent, the critic looks for something else to criticize. Nor is it because of a great love for the neighbor that the critic makes his accusations and carries his tales. Love covers a multitude of sins. Love does not [maliciously] expose sin... The critic is often moved by envy, jealousy, selfishness, and all other evil motives that put the poison sack of the asp under the human tongue."⁴

2. Freely talks about the faults of others (gossip).

The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body. Proverbs 18:8

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor? James 4:11-12

3. Focuses on things that are of little importance and inflates them (treats them as matters of vital importance).

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. Romans 14:1-4

4. Feels a sense of satisfaction at the faults of others.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. Therefore, knowing the fear of the

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, 226-227.

Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. 2 Corinthians 5:1-11

JUDGMENT IS DANGEROUS BECAUSE IT'S GOD'S JOB AND IT INVITES JUDGMENT

While it is possible to interpret the phrase “you will be judged” as pointing to the judgment others will pass on us when we are judgmental, what other people do is not to be our criterion. What does matter is the judgment of God. Jesus’ words, “you will be judged,” surely refers to the divine tribunal. In other words, to be quick to call others to account is to invite God to call us to account.⁵ Jesus is reminding us that we aren’t the final court. To judge another person’s motives is actually to play God. Jesus isn’t calling for His followers to cease to be examining and discerning, but rather to renounce the presumptuous temptation to try to be God by assessing the motives of others.

Elbowing in on God’s territory as judge is a precarious venture. If we pose as judges, we cannot plead ignorance of the law we claim to be able to administer. If we enjoy occupying the bench, we must not be surprised to find ourselves on the dock. In Romans 2:1 Paul says, “You have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.”⁶

A critical and judgmental spirit is certainly dangerous and injurious to the one being judged, but it is even more dangerous to the one critic and the judge, because by the measure with which he judges others it will be measured to him. Don’t ever forget that in matters such as this, God is ruthlessly fair. Are you prepared to be judged in the exact way you pass judgment on others? Such judgment is a boomerang, Jesus says, and will come back upon the one who judges. Jesus’ command is not a call to be blind, but rather a plea to be generous.

*Don't be too hard on the person who sins,
For the yardstick you lay on another
May someday be used as a measure for you;
Oh, be gracious and judge not, my brother! - HGB*

Brothers and sisters, we need to face and apply Jesus’ words with all their fearful weight and force. There is nothing more un-Christlike than a critical, judgmental, self-righteousness that is always looking for something wrong in someone else.

⁵ Leon Morris, *PNTC: The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 165.

⁶ John R. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 177.

II. JESUS CALLS OUT OUR SINFUL HYPOCRITICAL SPIRIT (v.3-4)

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye?

The illustration Jesus uses here is almost comical. Just like a camel passing through the eye of a needle (cf. Matthew 19:24, or swallowing a camel (cf. Matthew 23:24), here Jesus makes an effective use of hyperbole (exaggeration) and humor in His teaching. You can picture a man with a two-by-four or railroad tie stuck in his eye, trying to remove the speck of sawdust from another man's eye. As ludicrous as it sounds, it's a caricature of each of us. We are all masters of "speckology" and we all suffer from a condition known as "logitis".

If "speckology" were listed in a university catalog, the course description might read: "The identifying and criticizing of small shortcomings in the lives of everyone around you. Very popular course; fills early." Likewise, if "logitis" were to appear in a medical dictionary, it might be identified this way: "A disease that distorts self-perception and renders an individual incapable of recognizing personal faults. Occurs worldwide."

The word translated "speck" is the Greek noun (κάρφος - karpfos). It can be translated twig, straw, splinter, or sawdust. It can really be used to describe a small piece of anything. It's a word that points to something that is quite *insignificant*. Jesus pictures a person who fixes his gaze on something quite small and unimportant in someone else, but fails to notice what is much more significant in himself. This is where the "log" comes into play. A log is a considerable piece of timber – especially in comparison to a speck of dust or small splinter. As a matter of fact, the word Jesus uses here for "log," (δοκός - dokos), carries the idea of a beam that would be used in the floor or ceiling of a structure. The hyperbole Jesus uses here demolishes the position of the critic.

The point that Jesus is making here is that if we don't honestly deal with our own sinful hearts and confess them before the Lord, we blind ourselves to our own condition and cannot see clearly enough to help others with their sinful hearts. We must have an accurate assessment of ourselves before we confront others or we will be tempted to downplay our own brokenness and magnify the brokenness of others.

OUR FATAL TENDENCY

We have a fatal tendency to exaggerate the faults of others and to minimize the gravity of our own shortcomings. We seem to be able to see the sin of others with exacting clarity, but we suffer from spiritual myopia (nearsightedness) when it comes to seeing the sin in our own hearts. We find it easy to turn a microscope on another person's sin while we look at our own through the wrong end of a

telescope.⁷ We apply a strict and exacting standard to others, but we are quick to evaluate our own lives by a much less stringent and rigid law. We have a very rosy view of ourselves, but a very jaundiced view of others.

The wretched and gross sin that is always blind to its own sinfulness is *self-righteousness*. Almost by definition, self-righteousness is a sin of blindness, or of grossly distorted vision, because it looks directly at its own sin and still imagines it sees only righteousness.⁸ Some time ago a poem was written that captures the flaw of our self-righteous hypocrisy:

*A little seed lay in the ground
And soon began to sprout;
“Now, which of all the flowers around,
Shall I,” it mused, “come out?”*

The seed could then be heard saying, “I don’t care to be a rose. It has thorns. I have no desire to be a lily. It’s too colorless. And I certainly wouldn’t want to be a violet. It’s too small, and it grows too close to the ground.” The poem concludes with these stinging words:

*And so it criticized each flower,
That prideful little seed,
Until it woke one summer hour
And found itself a weed!⁹*

The very nature of self-righteousness is to justify self and condemn others. We see this in the case of David’s response to Nathan when he confronted David about his sin of adultery and murder.

And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, “There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.” Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.” Nathan said to David, “You are the man! 2 Samuel 12:1–7

⁷ Kent Hughes, 235.

⁸ John MacArthur, 435.

⁹ Our Daily Bread, *A Cure for Criticism*, June 6, 1999.

DO YOU NOT NOTICE

The term “notice” conveys the idea of sober and continuous meditation. Jesus is saying, in effect, “Stop and think about your own sin.” Take notice, the truth is usually worse than you know. Until you have done that, you’re in no position to confront someone else about their shortcomings. This brings us to the final major point on your outline this morning.

III. WE MUST EXAMINE OURSELVES BEFORE EXAMINING OTHERS (v.5)

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.

When Jesus says, “Judge not,” He doesn’t mean that it is wrong, under any circumstances, to pass an unfavorable judgment on the actions or opinions of others. Neither does He mean that it is wrong to reprove the sins and faults of others until we ourselves are faultless. If this were the case, it would be impossible obey many of the New Testament admonitions to help each other grow in holiness.

Lest we think Jesus’ command to “judge not” prohibits saying anything concerning the morality of others, He goes on to say, “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” The fact that a critical, judgmental spirit is forbidden doesn’t relieve us of our brotherly responsibilities to one another. Just 13 chapters later Jesus will tell us, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault...” Matthew 18:15.

To see sin in a brother or sister and refuse to say anything about it isn’t loving – as a matter of fact, it’s hatred. A physician who knows that a patient has an illness or disease, but refuses to tell that patient, isn’t a good physician. Moses, in Leviticus 19:17 says “You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor” Leviticus 19:17. A person who does not warn a friend about his sin cannot claim to love his brother. But this takes humility, sensitivity, and spiritual maturity. The writer of Hebrews tells us, “Discernment trained by constant practice [is able] to distinguish good from evil” Hebrews 5:14.

First – this gets the priorities right! The would be helper’s first priority must be to remove the obstacle to clear-sightedness from his own eye. With that done, he is equipped to bring aid to his or her brother or sister.

“See clearly” – this points to the importance of unimpaired vision.

1. Speck work requires self-examination.

Be quick to judge yourself, but slow to judge others. The fault you see in others may just be a reflection of your own.

A. We want to guard against shallow examination.

B. We want to guard against morbid introspection or “perpetual autopsy”.

2. Speck work requires humility.

When you see yourself for who you really are and have stood before the heinousness your own sinful self-righteous, when you have a keen awareness of the mercy and grace that have been shown to you at the cross, when you have a deep seated humility, understanding that you alone are the chief of sinners (cf. 1 Timothy 1:15), then, and only then, are you ready to help a brother or sister with the speck in their eye. Jesus doesn't want us to have an indifferent attitude toward the sin in our brothers' and sisters' lives, but He does want us to see their speck through clear, self-judged eyes.

3. Speck work requires tenderness.

There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.
Proverbs 12:18

SPECK-WORK EVALUATION QUESTIONS:

A. Is my motive to help or to hurt?

In Ephesians 4:15 Paul reminds us, “Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” J.C. Ryle comments on this passage saying, “It is possible to press the words of the Bible so far that they yield not medicine, but poison.” John Chrysostom, an early church father, said, “Correct him, but not as a foe, nor as an adversary exacting a penalty, but as a physician providing medicine, even more a loving brother anxious to rescue and restore.”

B. Do I have my facts straight? Is it true?

If it be true and certain that such an abomination has been done among you - Deut. 13:14

C. Can love cover this difference?

Love covers a multitude of sins - 1 Peter 4:8

D. Have I checked my own life?

Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted - Galatians 6:1

E. Am I prepared to grant forgiveness and assistance?

Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. 1 Thess 5:11

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.
Ephesians 4:32

F. Am I using God's methods to admonish?

Go to your brother alone - Matthew 18:15

THE RIGHT BALANCE

This right balance of humility and helpfulness is reflected in Psalm 51. David first prays, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.... Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation, and sustain me with a willing spirit. Then, he is able to say, "I will teach transgressors Thy ways, and sinners will be converted to Thee" (vv. 10, 12-13).¹⁰

The procedure for removing a speck from an eye is very delicate. There is nothing in the human body more sensitive than the eye. The instant we touch it, it closes up. What is required in clearing an eye is gentleness, carefulness, patience, and sympathy for the other person. In the spiritual realm, the care is even more delicate, for we are handling a soul... We must be humble, sympathetic, conscious of our own sins, and without condemnation.¹¹ Paul told the Galatians, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted" Galatians 6:1.

CLOSING BENEDICTION

Hear this benediction from Romans 12:3 as we bring our corporate worship to a close. Paul writes, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned" Romans 12:3. And all God's people said, "Amen!" Go in peace.

¹⁰ John MacArthur, 436-437.

¹¹ R. Kent Hughes, 236.