

Judge Not

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As a boy I heard of livestock catching a disease called “Hoof and Mouth” disease. My young ears heard it as “hoof *in* mouth disease”. Later I learned that “hoof *in* mouth” disease was a peculiarly *human* malady. Who of us has not suffered the old “foot in mouth” disease?

Jesus addresses another human problem in today’s text: “Plank in eye” disease. The command is “Judge Not.” His illustration has comic exaggeration:

Why do you see the speck in your brother or sister’s eye but do not notice the plank that is in your own eyes? How can you say to your brother or sister, “Here, let me take the speck out of your eye when there’s a two-by-four in your own eye?”

“Plank in eye” disease.

In his admonition “Judge not”, Jesus is not talking about the need for wise discernment in one’s own life, for sober judgment that helps us choose right over wrong, better over worse, safe over what is dangerous.

The biblical word “to judge” means to separate, to divide. We separate the good from the not so good. What would we be without the capacity to make good judgments?

But this is not what Jesus has in mind with his imperative, “Judge not.” He is talking about the ways we wound each other by sitting in judgment over others while ignoring our own faults and weaknesses.

What Jesus is saying is: This game you play pointing out other’s faults while ignoring your own is injurious to others, and it is injurious to your own soul.

“Judge not, that you be not judged”, he said, then added,

For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged; and the measure you give will be the measure you get.

There is a *proverbial* level of truth here. People take an exalted moral position and pronounce judgment on others. Then when they trip us and fall, as we all do, they fall all the harder and farther.

There is a *psychological* level of truth here. We often judge others out of the judgments we have ourselves suffered. We have internalized others' judgments and curses against us, and the only way we know to exorcise these negative judgments is to pass them on.

We may have been deeply shamed as a young person, and now we pass on that shame to others, often without realizing what we are doing. And we do it with our tone of voice as much as with our words.

Our judging of others is a way of defending ourselves against our own self-despising. The judging spirit is a wounded psyche in action.

What Jesus is speaking about in the extreme is the *spirit of scorn*. Scorn carries with it mockery, derision, contempt. Shakespeare's words are to the point:

Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes

Misprizing what they look on...

Misprizing what they look on. When we look at a child of God with scorn we indeed fail to prize them as a child of God created in the divine image;

II

When we judge we pretend to take the place of God. The book of James asks: "Who are you that you judge your neighbors?"

In Matthew's gospel Jesus told a parable. A farmer planted seeds, but wheat and weeds grew up together. What to do? If we try to pull up the weeds the wheat will come up too. Wait until the harvest. Then we can separate the wheat and the weeds.

The point? Matthew's church was filled with good and bad, wheat and weeds. Our own field has wheat and weeds, the good and the bad amix. The parable warns against premature moral judgments. It also says, let God be the gardener. Only God can do that kind of dividing. Only God is able to do that kind of surgery on the soul. We are like a plumber trying to do brain surgery with a wrench.

II

How do you want to spend the resources of your mind and spirit? In judging it is like our capacity to make sound judgments has gone awry. Like an auto-immune disease where the body's capacity to ward off infection turns against itself and begins to attack the body it is designed to protect.

Our judging others also distracts us from our own moral work. In A.A. members regularly take a "fearless moral inventory." If we do this we are much less apt to take *other's* moral inventory.

Judging others can fill up our minutes, hours, days, fill our minds and hearts. It's a full time job trying to take God's place. And it's not worth it.

What if we rose from our pillow every morning and said, “God, I will try to take care of myself today, and leave the world to you.” Think of all the time and energy it would save. Talk about time management!

When you see yourself sliding into judgment mode, here are three spiritual exercises:

- 1) Say to God: “God, I leave this matter to you.”
- 2) Find something to be grateful for. When gratitude is in your heart, there’s not room for lesser emotions.
- 3) Pray for the person you are tempted to judge.

IV

Richard Rohr speaks of our inclination to what he calls “dual thinking”: this is right this is wrong; this is good, this is bad. We make ourselves “separate and superior.”

We spend valuable psychic energy making comparisons. I like this, don’t like that. An old 15th century saying is “comparisons are odious.” Shakespeare turned the phrase this way: “comparisons are odorous.”

Opinions, opinions, opinions. Opinions begin to rule our lives. Soon our opinions spoil the day. Poet Joe Zarantonello has it right in his poem entitled “Pure Joy”:

Pure joy
 each moment
 minus
 your
 opinion
 of it.

Rohr urges us to “unitive thinking”. Everything belongs. Unitive thinking gives up “this versus that” thinking, life in the judgement frame of mind.

4th century desert father Abba Moses wrote a sermon on Jesus’ command, “Judge not”. The secret, he says, is “dying to one’s neighbor”:

To die to one’s neighbor is this: to bear your own faults and not to pay any attention to anyone else wondering whether they are good or bad. Do no harm to anyone, do not think bad in your heart toward anyone, do not scorn the man who does evil... Do not have hostile feeling toward anyone, and do not let dislike dominate your heart.

That’s the spiritual goal, however hard it is to achieve.

V

The great poet Maya Angelou tells this story on herself. She was visiting a new friend named Samia in Senegal. She was invited to dinner at Samia's house. It was her first trip to Senegal.

She entered the main room of the house where most of the guests were milling around. There was no furniture, only art pieces along the walls and a large beautiful oriental rug in the center. The guests were moving along the walls careful not to step on the carpet.

Angelou had known of an Egyptian woman who would not allow her servants to walk on her carpets. Only she and her family and friends could wear out or soil her treasured rugs. Angelou was gripped with righteous indignation. Is this what is going on here? She decided to test the matter. Pretending to look at a particular painting she walked across the middle of the rug, and then back across to look at another work of art. The other guests smiled at her weakly.

Then in a few minutes, two maids came in, rolled up the carpet she had walked on and carried it away. They returned with a rug equally as beautiful. They spread it out and patted it down smooth.

Then they placed glasses on the carpet and serving spoons, folded napkins, plates and silverware, and finally a large bowl of steaming rice and chicken. They were all about to eat the meal on the carpet.

Samia clapped her hands, gathering the guest and said, “We eat this dinner tonight in honor of a sister from America, Maya Angelou! Shall we eat?”

Angelou writes that her face was on fire with shame: “I had walked up and down over the tablecloth.” She sat and ate, but it was hard to swallow the food. It was a lesson she never forgot. She had to deal with her inner critic. Of course we never know enough about another’s life, culture, circumstances to judge.

Bud Wilkinson, former great football coach at Oklahoma, once defined football as 22 men in bad need of rest being watched by 40,000 people in bad need of exercise.

Jesus tells us to come down from the stands, and get in the game. This quiets the inner critic.

VI

A favorite animated movie of mine is named *Ratatouille*. It’s the story of a young rat in a world of humans who has a special gift for taste and smell and a

genius for cooking and who becomes the chef of a famous Parisian restaurant named *Gustaous*.

When the young rat's father learns of his son's aspiration to be a chef among humans he grows fearful for his son and warns him: "This is the way things are. You can't change nature." The son replies, "Nature is change, dad, and it starts when we *decide*." (There's a sermon there.)

The young rat gets his break when the cook staff discover that he has been secretly improving on their recipes. He is promoted to head chef. Then comes the day when the famous and feared food critic for the Paris newspaper comes to taste the new chef's cooking. He is notorious for writing witheringly brutal reviews which have ruined many a restaurant's reputation. His name appropriately enough is Anton Ego.

Ego arrives with his pen and notepad in hand and sits down to eat. What would the young chef prepare as the main course? He creates his version of *ratatouille*, a simple common dish from the countryside, normally beneath the dignity of a five star restaurant. When Anton Ego looks at it he is surprised and is ready to savage the chef with his review.

But when he tastes it he is transported, not just by its elegant taste, but also by the memories it stirs in him of his mother's hands serving him this dish when he was a boy.

Anton Ego has his pen in hand as he tastes the dish. He drops his pen. It tumbles in slow motion, end over end until it bounces against the floor.

I can still see the motion of the pen as it tumbles from his hand: Anton Ego testing the dish, his pen falling from his hand tumbling in slow motion until it bounced on the floor. He has been changed from a critic to a lover.

Let your pens drop! Soften your opinions, escape dual thinking, let go of comparing, do not let dislike dominate your heart. As the Master of our souls put it, Judge not!