

8. Judgment and the Ethic of the Kingdom (7:1-6)

Jesus concluded His discourse on His kingdom's ethic with a pointed treatment of the problem of judging. This subject provides a fitting capstone to the larger context for the simple reason that no other human practice so powerfully reflects and expresses the true nature of sin as the comprehensive estrangement of a human being. But if this assertion is indeed correct, then one should find judging to be a universal human behavior that is destructive at the level of all human relationships, including a person's relationship with himself. Careful consideration shows this to be exactly the case.

And yet, multitudes miss the crucial connection between human estrangement and the practice of judging – a very likely outcome if this passage isn't interpreted within the overall context. Jesus was addressing earthly-mindedness as the foundational barrier to the kingdom of heaven, and all human judgment reflects and proceeds out of this human condition. It isn't judging as such that Jesus confronted, but neither is it merely a fault-finding, judgmental spirit. Perhaps most Christians confine Jesus' concern in this passage to the sin of *judgmentalism*, and this was certainly His point of departure. But when this passage is viewed through the lens of the wider context, one discovers that Jesus was speaking ultimately to the entire psychology and operation of human judgment, positive as much as negative. He was here treating the problem of judging in the broadest sense – that is, as a natural, spontaneous, and even unconscious function of the fallen, earthly mind, rather than only in the narrow sense of a judgmental spirit. *The Lord's overarching concern was the human condition that destroys people's capacity to judge rightly, only one expression of which is judgmentalism.*

- a. Consistent with the rest of the discourse, Jesus introduced this passage with a summarizing exhortation (7:1). The grammar of this exhortation parallels that of 6:25 – “*Stop judging...*,” which highlights His assumption that all people are guilty of the kind of judgment He was referring to. What is most interesting is the motivating reason Jesus gave for not judging: *Stop judging in order that you should not be judged.*
 - Some have viewed this qualifier as indicating that those who refrain from judging other people will tend to find the same restraint exercised by others toward them; those who do not judge will not be judged by others. Viewed in that way, Jesus was most likely saying that judgmental people can expect to incur the condemnation of those around them.
 - The other option is that He was speaking of incurring God's final judgment. Both the grammar and context support this meaning.

But this raises the crucial question of the relationship between a man's judgment and God's judgment of him. Was Jesus implying that the person who refuses to take a judgmental posture toward other people will exempt himself from divine judgment? The obvious implication of this is that one can avoid God's final condemnation simply by being careful not to sit in judgment of other people.

For this reason some have argued that Jesus was simply saying that those who refrain from judging others will not come under God's condemnation for their judgmentalism. But this understanding merely states the obvious and so is meaningless; it is analogous to observing that those who refuse to rob banks will not be judged by God as bank robbers.

Clearly, both of the above interpretations are incorrect, and so others have viewed Jesus' statement more as a general principle of divine dealing: God will not be merciful in His judgment of those who withhold mercy in their own judgment of other people; *He will judge without mercy those who harbor a judgmental spirit*. There is apparent contextual support for this view, first in Jesus' subsequent explanation (7:2), but also in His parallel teaching on forgiveness (ref. 6:14-15; cf. 18:21-35). But whatever Jesus' precise meaning, He wasn't teaching a doctrine of reciprocity. Whether the issue is judgmentalism, forgiveness, or anything else, the Bible nowhere indicates that God's attitudes and actions constitute a "tit-for-tat" response to their human counterparts.

- b. If Jesus wasn't teaching that God's response to men is determined by their own corresponding actions, how is verse 7:2 to be understood? The answer lies in interpreting it within the larger context of the sermon. As noted at the outset, this passage is connected with the preceding context by the fact that human judgment – like every other aspect of human existence – is profoundly influenced (if not determined) by human fallenness. In their natural condition, all people judge with an earthly mind, regardless of whether they are judging themselves, other people, things and circumstances, or God Himself.

Though judging is often understood negatively as judgmentalism, it is simply the process of discerning and assessing something. One "passes judgment" when he chooses to believe and trust God just as much as when he reviles his fellow man. Judging is itself a neutral thing; *what makes it good or evil is the mind that makes the judgment and the conclusions that result from it*. At issue isn't the matter of judging as such, but the necessity of making right judgments (cf. John 7:24 with 5:30, 8:16; also 1 Corinthians 11:29). So, when Jesus prohibited anxiousness (6:25ff), He was, at bottom, condemning the universal human problem of wrongly judging God. This is because worry betrays an erroneous understanding of God (whether arising from ignorance or willful unbelief) that leads a person to doubt and distrust Him. The last context of chapter six, then, speaks to the matter of people judging God; the present passage speaks to people judging one another.

Viewed from this perspective, Jesus' explanation in verse 7:2 emphasizes the truth that God judges all men, not according to their specific behaviors and conduct, but at the point of their fundamental flaw, which is their estrangement from Him. That estrangement leaves them isolated within their own minds, which, in turn, consigns them to self-referential judgment in all things. They judge, not with the mind of God, but with their own mind. Unlike the True Man, estranged man effectively acts as his own god (ref. again John 5:30 and 8:12-16).

As he comes forth from his mother's womb, every man is his own "standard of measure" in his judgment of all things, and Jesus insisted that God will judge him according to that measure. By making themselves the standard and point of reference in judgment (whether or not they're aware of it), men implicitly claim for themselves the capacity to discern truth free of error, and so also the prerogative to make righteous assessments by virtue of that capacity. And having tacitly assumed this power and prerogative, the only way for God to judge them *in truth* is for them to be "measured according to their own measure."

- c. Again, the problem isn't human beings making judgments; this is an essential and glorious feature of bearing the divine image and likeness. Man cannot fulfill his created identity without judging, the greatest proof of this being the example of Jesus Christ, the consummate Man. In every circumstance and with regard to every person, Jesus made judgments. But His judgments were distinguished by the fact that they proceeded out of a mind in perfect harmony with His Father's; *Jesus judged all things, but always and only with "righteous judgment."*

And so, at issue isn't people acting as judges, or even the fact that they arrive at their judgments through the faculty of their own minds. These things are as they ought to be; the problem is the corruption of the human mind. Like Christ Himself, all human beings can and must judge, but they must judge righteously, which means judging with His mind – the mind of man as truly man. They must judge in truth, but their darkened understanding prevents them from doing so. Most importantly, this is as true of their positive judgments as their negative ones; *because of the Fall, human affirmation is just as flawed as human condemnation.*

Lest His hearers miss this and wrongly conclude that He was merely condemning a critical, judgmental spirit, Jesus went on to show that the focal point of His concern was the corrupted human faculty of perception and discernment that precludes sound judgment (6:3-5). He could have approached this in different ways, but chose to make His point by emphasizing the sharp contrast between people's discernment of themselves and their discernment of others. This is arguably the most effective approach since it accomplishes several things:

- 1) First, it addresses the matter of judging, not by considering the way people interact with and process complex moral or ethical issues, but the way they view themselves and others in their everyday lives. This shows great wisdom on Jesus' part, for this treatment forced every one of His listeners to acknowledge that they are "guilty as charged." If He had tried to make His point in the former manner, He'd have afforded the multitude a way to exempt themselves from His indictment; surely the common man cannot be faulted for lacking the skill and acumen to judge complex matters.
- 2) Secondly, Jesus' illustration effectively establishes the fundamental truth that human perception is *flawed*. And if people cannot see things as they really are, how can they make sound judgments?

- 3) Beyond that, the flaw in the powers of human perception and discernment is *uniform* and *directed*. That is to say, those powers are radically and entirely skewed in favor of the person himself. In his fallen condition, man's faculties by which he judges are captive servants of his self-referential, self-preoccupied mind (ref. James 2:1-4; cf. also 2 Corinthians 10:12). His estrangement from God has left him estranged from himself.
- 4) This incapacity is innate, but it is not beyond a person's recognition. At some level at least, people are able to perceive their bias toward themselves, but their tendency is to try to deny, minimize or excuse it. The reason is that this bias is self-serving: There is great personal and psychological advantage in viewing people and circumstances – even God Himself – through a self-referential mind. But the fact that people are able to recognize their skewed judgment leaves them *culpable* for it. Thus Jesus could rightly refer to His hearers as *hypocrites* (7:5).
- No human being is entirely free of the corruption of hypocrisy for the simple reason that no one's life conforms perfectly to what he knows, believes and upholds as a matter of principle.
 - Everyone is marred by hypocrisy, but not everyone is a hypocrite, for the hypocrite is guilty of conscious, willful deviation in his practice from what he professes and claims about himself. The hypocrite is guilty of pretence as well as imperfection.
- 5) And so, by referring to the multitudes as hypocrites, Jesus was indicating the nature and degree of their deviation and their great culpability for it. Their misjudgment was the product of more than ignorance or imperfection; it reflected a self-bound and self-concerned heart that exalts itself above others in denial of truth. *This condition enables a person to miss the log in his own eye while being able to spot a mere speck in the eye of his fellow man.* Two things about this metaphor are noteworthy:

The first is its extremeness. Jesus constructed His metaphor in hyperbolic terms in order to express just how radically people's perception is compromised. In one instance, their perceptual sense is keen enough to detect the tiniest splinter at a distance; in another, it is unable to detect a log immediately before them. If their sense of perception is so terribly dysfunctional, what does that say about their ability to judge accurately? *And if they can't trust their insight, how can they trust their judgments?*

The second is what it reveals about the psychology and orientation of human judgment. It was noted above that people's judgment is self-referential and self-serving; they judge from their own vantage point and according to their own self-interest. *Fallen human beings retain the capacity to discern, but their self-enslavement skews their discernment.*

They are able to accurately detect the smallest flaws in others, but they assess (judge) those flaws with a self-referential mind. Being their own point of reference in all things, people always (if not consciously) measure others by themselves. Self is the standard, but it is also the paramount concern. This means that people’s measurement of others has a self-oriented agenda (again, whether or not they are conscious of it). The outcome is inevitable: *When a person detects a point of failure or imperfection in someone else, his “earthly,” self-referential mind produces an assessment (judgment) that amplifies the flaw to such an extent that it surpasses – in his own perceived “righteous” judgment – any corresponding imperfection/failure in himself.*

And so, the problem Jesus was addressing doesn’t reside in the power of detection as such; fallen human beings retain the capability to accurately identify even the slightest moral/ethical defect. The failing is in the way people process and judge such defects: Like a colored lens that recasts in its own shade everything that is viewed through it, the natural, self-referential mind interprets and judges everything in a personally advantageous way.

Thus the psychology of fallen man’s judgment affords him two simultaneous mechanisms for enhancing his sense of self-righteousness: It allows him to “righteously” condemn the offender while, at the same time, affirm himself as exempt from the same unrighteousness. This is the universal dynamic of human judgment; it pertains to Jew and Gentile alike in every place, time, and culture (Romans 2:1). Most importantly to Jesus’ message – and consistent with Paul’s point in the Romans’ context (ref. 2:2-3:31), *this understanding shows that natural human judgment presents a monumental obstacle to righteousness by faith in Christ and, therefore, to entrance into the kingdom of heaven.* If men will enter Christ’s kingdom, they must be delivered from their self-righteous, earthly-mindedness; they must be enabled to make right judgments.

- d. Jesus was aware of how the crowd was processing His words and so spoke to their wrong thinking. Hearing Him with fallen minds, they would have been offended, reasoning that He was wrongfully demanding that they refrain from judgment altogether. *They would have missed the fact that He was calling them to judge rightly because they already presumed the rightness of their judgments.* All they could hear was a man forbidding them to judge other men.

Like all human beings, the gathered multitude regarded themselves as righteous in their judging, not proudly self-righteous. From that vantage point, Jesus’ words could only be construed as demanding that they *unrighteously* forego all judgment of other people. Once again, the way they perceived His instruction inclined them to conclude that He was setting Himself against the Law of Moses and God Himself (5:17-18). To the natural Jewish mind, Jesus was introducing a new and offensive “way” – a new ethic that contradicted both the Law and their expectations regarding the promised kingdom (cf. Acts 19:1-9, 22:1-4, 24:1-16).

And so Jesus confronted His hearers' misjudgment by making it clear that He was calling, not for the absence of all judgment, but for sound judgment (7:6): "*Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine...*" As before, He drew upon imagery that would have had a powerful effect on those listening to Him. The Israelites didn't keep dogs as pets; they were undomesticated, filthy and frequently diseased animals that roamed the towns and countryside in scavenging packs. Hungry and wild, dogs were often vicious and were regarded as defiled and dangerous. Understandably, it was no small insult to refer to a person as a "dog" (cf. Exodus 22:31; Deuteronomy 23:18; 2 Samuel 3:7-8, 9:1-8, 16:5-9; 1 Kings 21:17-23; Psalm 22:16-20; Isaiah 56:8-12; etc.).

Swine were regarded with even more contempt because the Law defined them as unclean. They could not be eaten, let alone offered to God as sacrificial animals. Thus the apex of Jewish outrage against the Gentiles occurred when the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes defiled the temple by erecting an altar there to Zeus and sacrificing a pig on it. If it was an insult to call a man a dog, it was more so to refer to him as a pig. D. A. Carson observes: "*The two animals together serve as a model of people who are savage, vicious, held in abomination.*"

The Jews felt right in speaking of certain people in this way, but Jesus' use of this language must have seemed strange in light of His preceding directive. *By referring to men as dogs and pigs, wasn't He guilty of the same judgmentalism He was condemning?* Doubtless this would have occurred to His listeners, and this is exactly what Jesus intended. He wanted to bring them to a point of crisis in their thinking in order to move them beyond their narrow categories and conceptions; maybe then they could see the truth about their judging.

The Jews judged some men as metaphorical dogs and pigs, but their judgment was unrighteous because it was the product of a perverse, self-righteous mind. To them, a man could be righteously regarded as a "dog" simply because of his non-Israelite status. It didn't matter who he was in himself; he was judged to be a dog solely on the basis of his ethnicity. Jesus also passed judgment on men, but He did so in truth. *When He drew upon the labels familiar to the sons of Israel, He used them for the sake of truth, not judgment based on externals or appearances.* In a powerful example of this, Jesus would later set Himself against the judgment of His Jewish countrymen by taking the "bread" of divine mercy that belonged to them as "children" and giving it to a Syrophenician "dog" (Matthew 15:21-28).

Though Jesus' words likely appeared self-contradictory, the crowd would have affirmed His exhortation; they would never give what is holy to dogs. *But their agreement was itself the product of their unsound judgment;* if they knew what He really meant, they'd have been outraged. It's not the Gentiles who are "dogs," but all who refuse and oppose Jesus' kingdom. In prophetic fulfillment, the day was at hand when the dogs of Israel would seek to devour those who set before them God's holy gospel. They would miss the kingdom because they could not "judge rightly" (cf. Psalm 22:16; Isaiah 8:11-15; Luke 2:24-35; also John 7:1-24).