

Merciful Judgment: A Field Guide

How to Judge without Being Judgmental (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

³⁷ “Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸ give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.”

³⁹ He also told them a parable: “Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit? ⁴⁰ A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher. ⁴¹ 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? ⁴² How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother’s eye. (Luke 6:37–42)

From Verse 37 to Verse 42

- A. We continue now in our dealing with the subject of judgment—not God’s judgment of us, but our judgment of one another.
 - 1. I mentioned last week that Christ is not categorically renouncing all forms of judgment in this text. Rather, He is attempting here to move His disciples from the v. 37 kind of judgment—that is arrogant, condemning, destructive—to the v. 42 kind of judgment—that is humble, hopeful, and restorative.
- B. And this is the essential trajectory I desperately want us to be on as a church as well.

The Unfortunate Undertow

- A. It is my understanding that, even for the people of God, even for those saved from judgment by the gracious intervention of Christ and the cross, there is still in our flesh this constant undertow pulling us from v. 42 back to v. 37.
- B. This is why we can’t hardly open up an epistle in the NT without seeing this sort of thing at work in the Christian churches, threatening to unravel the very fabric of their covenant community.
 - 1. Paul is writing to the churches about it: “Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother?” (Rom 14:10).
 - 2. James is writing to the churches about it: “^{11a} Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. . . . ^{12b} [W]ho are you to judge your neighbor?” (James 4:11a, 12b).
 - 3. John is writing to the churches about it: “Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness” (1 John 2:9).

- C. This sort of judgmentalism is everywhere. Even among the redeemed community of God. And we ought not to be so naïve as to think it isn't here in our midst as well—or, perhaps better put: here in our own hearts.

The Need for a Field Guide

- A. I'm titling the next two messages: Merciful Judgment: A Field Guide - How to Judge without Being Judgmental.
- B. I'm running with this idea of a "Field Guide" because, if you are anything like me, the teachings of Christ seem to make sense in the mornings when I'm reading my Bible and sipping my coffee, but once I step out into the day everything gets complicated.
 - 1. I need a Field Guide. I need something I can reference in the field, when I'm in the middle of life and this stuff comes up. I don't trust my reflexes in those moments. Somehow or other it seems I am always able to justify my harsh judgments of others.
 - a. So I want us to settle in here, double down, and actually get a sense of what v. 42 kind of judgment looks like out in the field of real life.
- C. Now, I'm calling this kind of judgment we're aiming for "merciful judgment".
 - 1. I'm aware of the irony. We typically think that mercy and judgment are opposed to one another. But not in the biblical worldview. The Bible presents a world into which God Himself comes in Jesus Christ, takes upon Himself our judgement, and extends to us His mercy.
 - a. And in light of this, we can point out something that is wrong in another without crushing or condemning them, but with great hope and expectation because our God is one who saves, and redeems, and renews broken, sinful people in Christ. Hence, "merciful judgment".
- D. I'm organizing this Field Guide by way of four critical questions: (1) Who Should We Judge?; (2) What Should We Judge?; (3) Why Should We Judge?; and (4) How Should We Judge?
 - 1. We will cover the first three this morning, and we'll save the fourth for next time.

(1) Who Should We Mercifully Judge?

(1) Ourselves

- A. It cannot go without being said that, before we even attempt to judge any other person at all, we must most carefully and painstakingly judge ourselves. That is the burden of this whole text in Luke: "[F]irst take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye" (v. 42b).

1. There is a sequence, an order of events here. First, judge yourself, then, and only then, will you be ready to mercifully judge someone else.
- B. Surely this is what Christ is after in [John 8](#) when the scribes and Pharisees bring a woman before Him whom they just caught in the act of adultery. They've got stones in hand, ready to condemn, and He says this: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (v. 7b).
1. In other words: "Judge yourselves before judging this woman." And, when once we truly do this, do you know what happens? We drop the stones. We withdraw our condemnation. Because we see our own sin, our own desperate need for God's mercy, and His amazing willingness to extend it to us.
 - a. O we might still feel led to talk to the woman about her sin, but we won't have that conversation with stone in hand. Instead, we'll talk with her, as we said last week, in the light of the cross:
 - i. "Jesus doesn't condemn you, and I don't either. There is so much hope for sinners like us in the gospel. Let's grow in grace together!"

(2) Our Brothers and Sisters

- A. But, now assuming we start here with ourselves, who else are we then to mercifully judge?
1. Well, tucked within the statement we just read from Jesus back in [v. 42](#) is a clue: "[F]irst take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye" (v. 42b)
 - a. In other words, this is a family affair. We are not called to judge those outside the family of God, but those within it—those who have professed a faith in Christ and taken His name upon themselves.
- B. This hint in [v. 42](#) is made plain by Paul in [1 Cor 5:9-13](#). There is a man in the church that is sleeping with his mom and the church is allowing it, even boasting of it. Paul calls them to judge this brother and remove him from among them.
1. But then he clarifies something for them: "⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?¹³ God judges those outside. 'Purge the evil person from among you'" (1 Cor 5:9–13).
 - a. It is the one inside the church that we are to mercifully judge: "anyone who bears the name of brother" (v. 11).

- i. The church is to be holy, set apart, altogether different from the world. And therefore, those claiming to be in Christ ought to start looking more and more like Him. So if a so-called brother is in serious, unrepentant sin we are called to bring it to his attention.
 - b. But this is in contradistinction from the way we treat those outside the church, the “outsider” (v. 12)—the person who’s not claiming to be a believer.
 - i. We might call such a person to repent, believe in Christ, and be saved from the coming judgment of God in wrath, but we leave any judgment of them ultimately to God. We don’t hold them to a standard they never asked to be held to in the first place.
- C. It is one of the greatest tragedies that often Christians, as they grow comfortable with the people of God, forget how to hang out and table fellowship with non-Christians.
 - 1. We have radically different value systems. We can’t bear to hear them cursing, or talking about their sexual perversions, or idolatrous worship, or whatever. We’re uncomfortable with the whole thing. We want to tell them they offend us, or this or that behavior is wrong.
 - a. But do you want to know what Jesus and Paul would call us to do here? Love them. Associate with them. Eat with them. Don’t focus on these secondary matters, focus on their hearts. Get to know them, love them, and, in that, start to lead them towards the cross.
- D. So, with regard to our Field Guide the first question we must deal with is: “Is this person even claiming to be a Christian?” Depending upon the answer you ought to handle the situation in completely different ways.

Let a Righteous Man Strike Me

- A. But let me pause here at this juncture for a moment and just get personal with you: If you are a brother or sister in Christ, are you open to this sort of correction and merciful judgment from others? Sure, we’ve said, begin by judging yourself. But how do you respond when that judgment comes to you from someone else?
 - 1. Do we respond like David in Ps 141:5: “Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head; let my head not refuse it.”
- B. My hunch is that such a thing is a bit foreign to us. We’d rather say: “Let a righteous man strike me and I’ll strike him back. Who does that jerk think he is, talking to me like that?!”
 - 1. But, if that is our attitude we miss the point. There’s often a log, a speck, in my eye. I won’t always see rightly. I need the family of God speaking in. We not only need to mercifully judge our brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to be mercifully judged ourselves!

(2) What Should We Mercifully Judge?

A. Now, if we are to mercifully judge those inside the church, what exactly are we to judge? This question is of the utmost importance because many of us, as our text in [Luke 6](#) points out, are tempted to be hypercritical, trigger-happy, noticing every little thing that's off in another person and condemning them for it.

1. But I want to know: Is there some sort of criterion to help us determine whether an issue is really worth addressing?

- a. I have to be a bit simplistic here, but hopefully it's still helpful.

B. If we search the Scriptures I believe we find that what we are to mercifully address in one another falls into one of two general categories: (1) Doctrinal Issues; and (2) Moral Issues. But now let's press into each of these briefly.

(1) Doctrinal Issues

A. Regarding Doctrinal Issues, when you study church history, it really humbles you. One of the things you immediately realize is that there have been countless interpretations of the Bible's words through the centuries. And on many doctrines, faithful, godly men disagree.

1. So we are left needing to discern, which doctrines are central and non-negotiable? And which doctrines, are still important to us, but we are willing to agree to disagree with others who believe differently?

- a. To use terminology you may have heard before: Which doctrines do we hold with a closed-hand, and which do we hold with an open-hand?

B. When we look to the NT for help, while it remains tough to discern exactly where the line is between open and close-handed doctrines, the core of the matter seems unmistakably clear: If there is anything that the apostles appear ready to die defending, it's the gospel.

C. Take Paul writing to the churches in Galatia as an example. Why does he write the letter in the first place? What does he feel must be addressed in these fledgling congregations? Well, he states it right out of the gate: "⁶ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷ not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ" (Gal 1:6–7).

1. In this case, there were Jewish "Christians" coming from the church in Jerusalem, saying that justification before God required not just faith in Christ, but works of the law. And Paul says, "I cannot let this go unaddressed!"

- a. And he goes on in [v. 8](#) to state just how far he is willing to go in standing for this truth, this doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone: "But even if . . . an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal 1:8).

- i. And the rest of the letter is one passionate plea for the Galatians to return to the one true gospel.

D. In the NT, the apostles clearly give doctrinal priority to the gospel. And so should we.

1. So, while I know again that I'm speaking simplistically, here at least is what we should come away with:
 - a. Before we feel we simply must bring up this or that subject with a brother or sister, we should ask: "How close-handed is this? How does this matter relate to the gospel? Am I dealing with central issues of the faith, or am I splitting hairs somewhere over here in the open hand—being contentious and divisive over debatable matters of secondary importance?"

E. Have you been a part of one of those churches that get this wrong?

1. I was just talking to a lady the other night whose husband is from Lancaster, PA—Amish Country. And she was telling me that one of the hot-button issues between the Amish and the Mennonites had to do with the way they thought the corners of their buggies should be shaped—"You think rounded; we think squared!"
2. And we think: "They're splitting and getting all fired up over that?!" But you see, we can do the very same thing:
 - a. "What's your view on spiritual gifts? O that's ridiculous. Are you even saved?"
 - b. "What's your take on the end-times? O, yup, it's as I thought. I'm going to have to break fellowship over this one."
 - c. "Wait, you don't believe in the five points of Calvinism? I'll be fasting and praying for you, heathen."

F. Don't get me wrong. These things are important. And we should engage one another regarding them. But the gloves don't come off for these open-handed issues. We will die defending the gospel. But we will shake hands with Paedobaptist Cessationist Sabbatarian Presbyterians, that's fine!

(2) Moral Issues

A. And this same sort of thing guides our approach to moral issues as well.

1. There are in Scripture things we might call black and white moral issues, things that God's word is abundantly clear on—like the situation back in [1 Cor 5](#): You don't sleep with your Father's wife.
 - a. These matters must be addressed because they threaten the very soul of this individual and the integrity of the Christian community.

2. But then there's this whole other category that we might call gray moral issues. Issues that the Scriptures either don't clearly speak to, or they give a freedom regarding. In any case, these are issues that don't call for judgment, but for charity and tolerance.
- B. I'm reminded of the situation in [Rom 14](#), where it seems some of these young Christians felt inclined to follow Jewish food laws from the OT, while other Christians in the church felt a freedom in Christ to eat anything. And Paul writes this: "¹As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. ²One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. ³Let 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. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?" (Rom 14:1–4a).
1. Judgement is firing here from both sides! The one who eats: "Look at that legalist over there, abstaining." The one who abstains: "Look at that glutton over there, eating." But according to Paul: God has welcomed them both in Christ!
- C. We like to take these gray issues and make them black and white. We feel justified in judging one another for all sorts of things:
1. "Are you watching how that person is parenting their child? I should go say something."
 2. "Do you see what that family is spending their money on? They bought a boat. Clearly their treasure is not in heaven."
 3. "I was out the other night and I ran into so and so. You're not going to believe it. She was drinking a glass of wine!"
 4. "O you eat at McDonalds? Well, that's not being a very good steward of the temple of the Holy Spirit."
 - a. And in all of this we act as if we have chapter and verse to back it up, but, most often, we don't.
- D. Now, again, should we engage in discussion on these matters? Absolutely. We want to be better parents, stewards, and disciples. But we must leave room for difference, for charity and for tolerance.

(3) Why Should We Mercifully Judge?

(1) For the Good of Our Brother or Sister

- A. So many times our judgments of others are self-serving. We speak against people not because we are particularly moved with love and compassion for them, but because they annoy us, or because we like to win an argument, or because we like to feel superior!
- B. But we must not forget the motivation held out by Jesus back in our text: ". . . to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye" (v. 42).
1. That's what all of this discussion has been leading to! Jesus wants us to grow more skilled at helping others see. If I judge another believer, it's not to serve me, but to serve them!

- C. That's why, even in the most extreme cases—like that one back in [1 Cor 5](#) where Paul called the church to not even eat with the kid—Paul would give his motivation in [v. 5](#): “. . . so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”

1. “I want him to see and be saved!”

(2) For the Glory of God

- A. And finally, ultimately in all of this we are motivated with a concern for the glory of God. God's reputation among the nations is on the line here.

1. For, as Jesus says back up in [Luke 6:40](#): “A disciple . . . when he is fully trained will be like his teacher.”

- a. In other words, the world will come to know what Jesus is like by looking at His disciples. And if we are denying the gospel of grace or other key biblical doctrines, if we are taking His name on our lips while we go on living like the devil, then what Paul said of the Jews in [Rom 2](#) would be true of us: “The name of God is blasphemed among the [nations] because of you” ([v. 24](#)).

- B. So instead we give ourselves to [v. 42](#) kind of merciful judgment. Judgment that centers on the right people, regarding the right issues, guided by the right motivations. Christ help us!