

July 28, 2019

## Lesson 9: Jesus Teaches About Spiritual Discernment

Scripture: Matt. 7: 1-6, 15-23

### Context:

While last week's lesson closed the antitheses and the beatitudes, this week's lesson closes the sermon on the mount. Jesus sums up with the practical behavior followers should exhibit and warns them of what will happen to them if they do not heed his words. It now comes time for them to act on their part. The first piece of advice Jesus gives focuses on the sin of judgmentalism. While not in many dictionaries, we know judgmentalism as a social sin with the habit of constantly finding fault with what others say and do.<sup>1</sup> Those who criticize find themselves in a superior position in which they feel the need to point out the faults of others without examining their own. The sin is usually put in tandem with those individuals giving false information as made clear in the statement about not giving pearls or "holy things" to "swine." Judgmental false prophets can quickly devour people and abuse the trust that is given to them.

This passage indicates that we cannot completely abstain from judging people. However, the trouble seems to be that when the judgment is severe, we take on a role that is not meant for humans. Those guilty of the sin of judgmentalism must expect to render account for a particular form of self-indulgence as for others.<sup>2</sup> Yet this will be hard to do as when making excuses for one's own vices, there has been ingratitude shown towards God. If God can deal graciously with our own manifold shortcomings, we should be cautious if judging the shortcomings of others.<sup>3</sup> Don't sit in a chair that does not have your name on it.

The closing of this sermon continues with the theme of false prophets. Jesus's words are to warn the crowds of those charismatic powers of individuals who will seem like authentic members of Christ's flock, but will not live the life they proclaim. The flock will see it in their actions and will notice it by how they live. If they profess to follow Jesus, that will be shown in their daily habits and actions.

The climax of the closing comes in verses twenty-one through twenty-three. The gospel of Matthew stresses that the devotion to Jesus as Lord comes from obeying the Lord's ethical instructions.<sup>4</sup> The translation of the phrase "you people who do wrong" is "lawlessness" in Greek, implying that the people know the law, but choose not to follow it.<sup>5</sup> Jesus is telling Christians they are to shape up and to not just hear his words, but to

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas R.A. Hare, "Matthew," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY, 1993), 76.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

act on them. His warning is that their failure to do so will lead them to missing God's glory on earth.

### **Application**

The number one criticism I have heard of the church from my childhood and teenage and young adult years is that the church is both judgmental and hypocritical. Being an insider, it has been difficult at times for me to understand that in comparison to my personal experience. Unfortunately, the experience has changed over the years as I have had actual conversations with people within the church and outside the church about judgmentalism and then experienced the hypocrisy first hand.

We all judge. Even the most open-minded people will have a conclusion they draw about certain people or behaviors. To a degree, that is expected and normal. There are behaviors that can cause issues and there need to be boundaries.

Yet what Jesus focuses on is when we become so focused on other's behavior that we forget to examine our own. We all have vices and faults that are growing edges for us. We would do well to remember that just as we may be trying to work on our stuff, others hopefully are working on their stuff. And unless it is behavior that is hurting others, then we should let them figure out how to go about in that way.

Another thing that this passage makes clear is that we also should be discerning about whom we trust. While it would be wonderful to just trust that everyone has our best interest at heart, this passage reminds us that there are people who do not value our feelings or our core beliefs. There are plenty of wolves in sheep's clothing seeking to take advantage of others for their own gain. They sometimes find their best victims in the church. A friend once told me that the same advice from Proverbs that we give our children concerning dating should be the same for whom we trust: "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."<sup>6</sup>

This does not mean you should be eyeing every church member suspiciously, but it should help you see red flags. If people seem to taunt a lot of good fluff, but rarely engage or enter into relationships with others, that's a red flag. If people love to gossip, but rarely help others, that is a red flag. If people grumble about change and then seek to stop change for their own desires to be met, that is a red flag. When there are "anonymous" complaints about things going between groups, clergy, and staff members, that is a red flag. Look for those individuals who are honest, who bear good fruit daily, and who are encouragers.

The final words of Jesus indicate that he expects his disciples to be mature or seek the road to maturation. For us it means thinking about how we "judge" people and then looking at our behavior. It means that we trust the right people, those who not only say the right thing, but do the right thing. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ means that we don't just do good works and miracles, it means that we live a transformed life.

What sins do you judge more than others? Who is a group of people that you tend to judge more? How do you know if you can trust someone? What are the marks of a trustworthy Christian? What does it mean to bear good fruit? What are the signs of someone who is obedient to Jesus?

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<sup>6</sup> Pro. 4: 23, NRSV.

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