

Living Graciously

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on September 16, 2018.

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.

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.

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 7:1–12).

“Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matt. 7:1). I would imagine you have heard this verse more frequently in recent years. It is perhaps the most frequently quoted verse today. As it is used, the intent is to stop judging of the actions of others regardless of the action. This verse is the intolerant cry of the supposed tolerant, demanding unfettered liberty to sin. In reality, “Judge not, that you be not judged” has become nothing more than a justification and defense of sin. As if to say, “I don’t share your definition of sin, and even if I did, you sin too, so don’t judge me.”

While this verse has been taken wildly out of context, there is a morsel of truth in its modern manipulation. Christians have been labeled judgmental and ungracious, and sometimes rightly so. Christians stand for moral purity but some have lived secret lives of hypocrisy. This is not a modern problem, nor is the solution.

First and foremost the Christian life is a life rooted in the gospel. Judgment is never justified by hypocrisy, but may be warranted revealing God’s perfect standard of righteousness and His perfect provision in Christ. Living graciously before God and man reveals the necessity of grace and the peace of its presence. Every Christian is called to live graciously as a recipient of God’s grace.

Based on this fact, there are three truths I want to draw to your attention as we walk through this passage: First, judge wisely: there is a kind of judging that is wise and there is a kind that is foolish. Knowing and exercising the difference requires wisdom, so judge wisely. Second, persist faithfully: the Christian life is an endurance event in which we walk daily dependent upon the Lord. We are saved by God’s grace so also we walk by it, so persist faithfully. Third, live graciously. What the world knows as the “Golden Rule” is simply the words of Christ to His disciples, revealing how God’s grace directs how we live. As we are saved by God’s grace alone through faith in Christ alone, we live graciously.

Judge Wisely

Do you see the sins of others more clearly than your own? You're not alone. Our flesh excels at masking our sins, replacing them with the sins of others. Do you see the sins of others more clearly than your own? You're not alone. In our flesh, this can render the Christian a hypocritical fool, and in our hypocrisy we judge foolishly. Consider three aspects of judging foolishly.

First, judging foolishly, you focus on the sins of others while ignoring your own. It is far easier to criticize the moral decline of the culture around you but far more difficult to examine your heart. Your hypocrisy begs the question: "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but not notice the log that is in your own eye?" (Matt. 7:3). No one is more deceived than the sinner who ignores his own sins, and often no one is more vocal about the sins of others than the self-deceived sinner.

Second, judging foolishly, you emphasize the sins of others while hiding your own. This is not merely ignorance but far more sinister. Often it is the one who hides his secret sins that is the least gracious and the most judgmental. Show me a domineering legalist, and I will show you a secret immoralist. Harsh criticism often flows from a calloused heart, a heart that has forgotten that "with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you" (Matt. 7:2). Be sure of this: your sin is not hidden from God, and "your sin will find you out" (Num. 32:23), and it is often as near as your judgmental heart and critical spirit.

Third, judging foolishly, you try to fix someone else when you need fixing. It is one thing to focus on and even emphasize someone else's sin, but it is another thing to engage in trying to correct it. Or, as Jesus puts it: it is impossible to properly remove a speck from your brother's eye with a log in your own. It is possible that you see yourself as having the solution to your brother's problem, when in reality you are the problem.

So, beware lest you judge foolishly. But, this does not mean that there is no place for wise judgment. In fact, there are times when it is necessary. There are times to judge between right and wrong. There are times to call sin "sin" and to stand for righteousness. There are times to keep a brother or sister out of the entrapment of sin. Consider three aspects of judging wisely, because it's not that we never judge but how and when we do it. This requires godly wisdom.

First, judging wisely begins with humility. The Proverbs teaches, "when pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom" (Prov. 11:2). When confronted with the sin of another, you must first confess, "But for the grace of God go I." When you walk humbly, remembering that you are a sinner saved by God's grace, then you are able to help others. By first taking the log out of your own eye, you can see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Second, judging wisely requires faithful obedience. If the speck in your brother's eye is the sin that you judge, then the log in your eye reveals the magnitude of your disobedience. If the log in your eye is your disobedience, then removing it implies obedience. Therefore, faithful obedience is like light shining in the darkness. You see clearly your own sinful nature and how to help your

brother. Consider the magnitude of this truth: often we think of obedience as personal only, but your faithful obedience may serve as an instrument of grace in hands of the Redeemer, while your disobedience may render you useless.

Third, judging wisely exercises discernment. Jesus cautions, “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” (Matt. 7:6). The animals that Jesus describes in his analogy are not only unclean for a Jew; they are wild, savage creatures. To cast beautiful and costly jewels before such beasts is foolish and ineffective. A dog or pig will not be satisfied with tasteless pearls but may retaliate in vengeance against you. Likewise, we must exercise discernment in helping others. Have you ever in humility sought to help someone in their struggles and received in response the growl and fangs of an angry animal? Have you ever confronted a friend in love about their sin and been trampled upon by their verbal vengeance? There is a time and place to help with the speck in your brother’s eye but not when his heart is not ready, so judge wisely. But do not be discouraged, because we are called to judge wisely but also to persist faithfully.

Persist Faithfully

In Jesus’ parable of the sower, He describes seed sown on rocky soil. This seed “hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away” (Matt. 13:20-21). In summary, he does not persist faithfully. Jesus said, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62), revealing that our work in the kingdom of God gives us assurance, as we persist faithfully. Therefore, we may think of the Christian life as a grace-infused life of faithful persistence.

Jesus teaches this faithful persistence using three words: ask, seek, and knock. Each of these words is a command and in the present tense. We are persistently asking, persistently seeking, persistently knocking. How do we persistently ask, seek, and knock? We do so through the means of grace of prayer and God’s Word.

In prayer, we ask, seek, and knock, as the Shorter Catechism describes it, “offering up our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will” (WSC 98). James scolded the church: “You do not have, because you do not ask” (James 4:2). Christian prayer is not a one and done act of piety but an ongoing means of grace. Jesus describes this faithful persistence with a parable: “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming’” (Luke 18:2-5). Think about that widow’s persistence and how you pray.

Are you faithfully persisting in your petitions to your heavenly Father? He is not a wicked judge but the Lover of your soul. Ask yourself: If your son asks you for bread will you give him a stone? If he asks you for a fish, will you give him a snake? “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good

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things to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:11). And, in faithfully persisting in prayer, we pray “for things agreeable to his will” by being persistently in God’s Word, asking, seeking, and knocking through the full canon of Scripture.

God’s Word directs our asking, seeking, and knocking, leading us in what to pray. This requires faithful persistence in Scripture, daily reading God’s Word. Faithful persistence is not without reward. “For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened” (Matt. 7:8). Asking, seeking, and knocking through prayer and the Word provides intimate fellowship and joy in the child of God, so let us persist faithfully, and live graciously.

Live Graciously

As a child of God, we live in light of the gospel truth that we are saved by God’s grace through faith in Christ. Therefore, we judge wisely in humility, in faithful obedience, exercising discernment. We do this not to merit God’s favor but in gratitude for what He has done for us in Christ. Such selflessness does not come natural to sinners saved by grace but supernaturally we persist faithfully asking, seeking, and knocking. Doing so reminds us of our dependence upon the God who saved us, of the Father who adopted us, of the Son who died for us, of the Spirit who indwells us.

As recipients of God’s sovereign grace, we live graciously, which Jesus summarizes in a “Golden Rule”: “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 7:12). This all-encompassing statement connects our faithful persistence and wise judgment into a life of grace lived *coram deo*, before the face of God.

To be clear, Jesus is not teaching a form of spiritual reciprocity. He is not saying if you do to others what you wish, then they will do it. That is Eastern mysticism not biblical Christianity. Rather, Jesus is saying that living graciously with others in light of the grace you have received sums up the Law and the Prophets. Or put another way, it succinctly summarizes life as a citizen in the kingdom of heaven.

Judging wisely and persisting faithfully, we live graciously in this earthly kingdom because we have been redeemed for another. Living graciously is a gospel-centered life, a joyful life lived in light of the grace we have received in Christ.