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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
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Matthew 7:1-5

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Sermon on the Mount series continues today with a very famous section of the text. The whole Sermon is filled with memorable lines, of course, but this particular bit today isn't just a famous line. It's a concept that has entered our consciousness and become part of our culture. Most people wouldn't be able to point you to chapter and verse. Many people might not even know it's in the Bible at all. But at this point, you could almost say it's "in the water;" that's how famous it is. I mean Jesus's command, "Judge not, that you be not judged."

If I were writing a book about biblical concepts that have transformed the world, I would include this little precept. I would aim to show that some of our most noble modern ideals can be traced back to this idea. Ideals like toleration, open-mindedness, and mercifulness. Those are notions missing from a whole lot of human history, and I bet most of us would shudder at the thought of returning to a time when they were lacking.

But if I were writing a book about the most misused and misapplied Bible quotes of all time, I would have to include this line in that work as well. That is because there are probably few ideas that are tossed about as casually as this one, "Don't judge." And in the wrong context, these life-giving words of Jesus turn trite, meaningless, or even dangerous.

So that is what I aim to explore with you today. What did Jesus mean when He said, as the King James Version puts it, "Judge not lest ye be judged?"

I don't know if I have talked about this before, but I really love advice columns. I have been reading them for most of my life. All kinds of advice columns, from classics like Dear Abby, Ann Landers, Miss Manners, and Emily Post, to more modern ones like Carolyn Hax from the Washington Post, the Ethicist from the New York Times, and Dear Prudence in the online magazine Slate.

Very often, I find myself disagreeing with the professional advice giver, or at least wishing they were a little more nuanced in their response. But I don't read these columns so much because of what the columnists say, but rather, because I am fascinated by and often moved by the problems that people

write in with. I think it gives me insight into human nature.

There is a character created by the famous Catholic writer, G.K. Chesterton; Father Brown. He is an English priest who also happens to be an amateur detective. There is a BBC series based on the books. I was struck, years ago, when reading one of the stories, by the way that the character, Father Brown, explains his ability to solve mysteries. He attributes it to things he has heard in the confessional. Not actual crimes people would confess, of course; he never violates the seal of the confessional. But what he learns in the confessional about human nature; not just sins, but the things that drive people, good and bad, the intricacies of the human soul. The kinds of complicated components of their inner life that people usually reveal only to a priest, or a therapist, or to Ann Landers.

That's why I like advice columns. They give me insight into the intricacies of the soul and the things that drive us all. Things that bother us, infuriate us, grieve us, puzzle us, make us feel guilty, make us wonder if we are doing the right thing. The Sermon on the Mount, in addition to being a profound guide to Christian morality, is also a very practical summary of Jesus's best spiritual advice, if I can call it that. So when I am trying to think concretely about what it would look like to live a Sermon-on-the-Mount inspired life, I can't help but take account of a lot of the things I have learned about human nature from the real situations people write about every day in these popular advice forums.

It astounds me, and moves me, the way that people will bare their souls to strangers looking for validation, advice, opening themselves to criticism, condemnation, even ridicule. And now that virtually all of these advice columns are online, other readers weigh in with *their* comments. Sometimes these commentators prove more insightful than the professional columnist; other times they are as nasty as you can imagine internet trolls can be. In fact, some of the most popular new versions of these advice columns skip the professional advice-giver altogether and allow people to solicit the views of anyone who cares to respond. There's an especially popular one on reddit called (and I am paraphrasing here for the sake of propriety) "Am I the Jerk?" And the readers don't hold back; if they think you are indeed the jerk, they will say so!

In other words, what people are looking for when they write in to advice columns is judgment. Judgment on others, judgment on themselves. They want to know who's right and who's wrong when they have a dispute with a roommate over pets or dirty dishes. They want to know if they have unreasonable expectations of their in-laws during the holidays. They want help navigating tricky relationships and ethical quandaries in the workplace.

They want to know if they were out of bounds for uninviting their second cousin to their wedding after this cousin trashed their fiancée on social media. If they should report their neighbor for animal neglect because their cat is always outside. If their significant other is gaslighting them. If they should be honest with their best friend about concerns over developmental issues they think the friend's child might be having.

Life is complicated. Morality is not always so clear-cut when you get down to the nitty-gritty. People are an astounding mix of good and bad and figuring them out is a hard job. Figuring ourselves out is a hard job too, because we are so often blind to the very faults we pounce on so easily in others.

Advice columnists will never lack for work. That is because we are so desperate for guidance, understanding, and compassion. It is just about impossible to get by in this world or live a satisfying, harmonious life, without making judgments. Judgments about situations, other people, and ourselves.

Well, Jesus understands this better than anybody. He also knows that we are quick to condemn one another and exonerate ourselves, that we are often blind to our own faults while we magnify the faults of those around us, and not only does this lead to spiritually dangerous hypocrisy, it can ruin relationships and weaken the very fabric of society. So in addition to advising us about prayer and anxiety and marriage and possessions and other important aspects of life, Jesus spends a lot of time showing us how we should interact with other people, including if and how we should size them up morally.

And what He says about that is, "judge not." Judge not, because our knee-jerk tendency as fallen people is to be harsher on others than we are on ourselves. In fact, we are prone to totally write some people off with our judgments. One of things I have learned from all those advice columns I read is how quick we are to assign people labels to make sense of upsetting behavior. So we pronounce someone a narcissist. An addict. A liar. An abuser. An underachiever. A loser. A criminal. And it's true that many, many times, other people engage in behavior that we have a right and maybe even a duty to protect ourselves and our loved ones from. But we have to be careful about labels that let us write people off permanently. Jesus will never permanently write any of us off in this life, so how could we dare to do so?

"Judge not, lest ye be judged" means first of all this. Do not condemn anyone else with a condemnation that belongs only to God. Do not presume that anyone in this life is beyond the mercy or the transforming powers of God.

“For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.”

Jesus warns us that if we do dare to take the judgment of others into our own hands, it could well be turned back on us.

Jesus has lots of warning about why we should not be hypocrites and stories about why we should always show the mercy and kindness we ourselves might hope to be shown. One famous example is the woman caught in adultery in John chapter 8. (Adulteress. There’s a label for you.) The scribes and the Pharisees bring to Jesus a woman who has been caught in the act. Perhaps they really were gearing up to stone her, but more likely they were using this poor woman to put Jesus in a tight spot by getting Him to contradict the Law of Moses, which called for the death penalty for adulterers. But what does Jesus say to these sly plotters? “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone!” In other words, show some mercy and compassion, because in all likelihood you will need it yourself someday.

There is another layer to this theme. Not only should we show the same mercy on fellow sinners that we ourselves hope to be shown, we should take into account the hidden motives of the heart we can’t always see from the outside. People are complicated. This is one of the things that my lifetime of reading advice columns has made me especially sensitive to. You never know what kinds of limitations, traumas, or hurts someone is dealing with that might cause them to do wrong. You have no idea what kind of hand they have been dealt, if they are in fact more innocent or more guilty than they appear on the surface.

This is a theme that Jesus has spent a long time developing in the Sermon the Mount. We witness external acts. We can see when someone makes a big donation to charity or makes a grand speech about honoring God, but God Himself looks on the heart. God knows just how much of a sacrifice that charitable gift is or isn’t, and just how much of that noble speech is actually true.

At the same time, we see when someone insults us, or yells at the Starbucks barista, or fails to pay their child support, or can’t control their drinking, but God sees all the ways that person has struggled against their sin and all the ways their biology or their circumstances have contributed to their behavior. That is, it may be ours to condemn a sin when necessary, but never to condemn a person.

The truth is, we are probably all guilty of rushing to judgment and

condemning people without having all the facts. We shake our head in disgust at the addict or the drunkard on the street, not having any clues about what kind of suffering might have led him to this life. We sigh disapprovingly at the news of a friend's divorce, not having any idea what happens behind closed doors. And here's one that's especially hard for me, judging other people's parenting. We think we can condemn a mother or father for being too harsh or too indulgent without having any insight into their context, their background, their culture, or the kind of day they are having.

Jesus says, before you go around pronouncing judgment on others, take a long hard look at yourself. When we put this commandment into practice, the world is a better place. When we show compassion and tolerance, when we remember that all of us are sinners who rely on the mercy of God, we have a chance to institute real justice and draw that much closer to the Kingdom of Heaven.

And yet, I began this sermon by claiming that "Judge not" is one of the most misused and misapplied biblical quotes of all time. So let me explain why.

As always when interpreting Scripture, we need to look at context carefully. The Sermon on the Mount is first and foremost a call to a holy life. So no part of it can ever be used to excuse immorality or unethical behavior. Jesus prohibits us from condemning other people, but He commands us to discern good from bad. Unfortunately, one of the ways that "judge not" has filtered into contemporary culture is precisely that, the idea that we have no right to describe another person's actions or beliefs as right or wrong. When this idea gets even more oversimplified, as it often does, we are left with a kind of default moral relativism that leaves everyone confused. "You do you, and I'll do me." (It works if you don't think about it too hard.) No wonder people today feel the need to write to total strangers for advice about their moral problems!

As I have been thinking about this sermon and this verse from Matthew, there's a song that's been going through my head. It's really embarrassing for me to admit this, but the song is on my exercise playlist, because even if I don't like the message, I like the beat. Anyway, it's by Miley Cyrus, and it's called "We Can't Stop." And my kids aren't allowed to listen to it!

The lyrics start out like this.

*It's our party and we can do what we want  
We can say what we want  
We can love who we want*

*We can kiss who we want...*

It gets worse. There are parts I can't quote from the pulpit. But I bet you're getting an idea of this song, because it's hardly the only pop song out there about doing what you want because it feels good and because nobody has a right to tell you otherwise. The setting of this particular song is that everyone is dancing at a wild party, drinking and taking drugs, and doing whatever they feel like doing with one another. Then we come to this line.

*Remember, only God can judge us  
Forget the haters 'cause somebody loves ya*

When we say, "Judge not, lest ye be judged," there are a lot of people who imagine a scenario like this song. They think it means we can never condemn other people's actions, so long as they don't hurt other people, because we shouldn't be "haters." We shouldn't be judgmental. Live and let live, they say, and don't push your morality on other people.

I really believe that this song captures what a lot of people are thinking when they hear "don't judge." They think, well, it's fine if I don't want to join these revelers in their night-long, drug-fueled rave, but I have no right to condemn their behavior. As I said, this is oversimplified, but I am afraid this is a message that is being sent in our culture and some well-meaning Christians may find themselves afraid to push back because they are fearful of being judgmental. So let's be very careful about we interpret and apply Jesus's words.

The problem with this over-simplistic interpretation is that it directly contradicts almost everything else Jesus has said in the Sermon on the Mount. The fact of the matter is, Jesus commands us to distinguish between right and wrong, to teach our children right from wrong, and to do our best to build a society that embraces the good and rejects the bad. We have to be able to exercise moral discernment. Going back to some of my previous examples, if we want to be compassionate and help people with their addiction or alcoholism, we have to first agree that addiction is bad. If we want to help people avoid divorce and broken families, we have to first agree that faithfulness in marriage is good. And if we want children to be raised without excessive harshness or excessive permissiveness, we have to be able to make judgments about different behaviors.

Jesus was not inviting us to be moral relativists. In fact, the compassion and empathy that He urges us to practice are impossible if we do not recognize right from wrong. Wrongdoing hurts people, including the wrongdoers. That

is not what Jesus wants for us!

The word that Jesus uses when He says “Judge not” is the Greek word, *krino*. That word means to make a final determination of guilt. That role really does belong to God alone, so in that sense, Miley Cyrus was right. “Only God can judge ya.” We must never presume to know the state of another person’s soul or to imagine they are beyond mercy. We must never usurp the role of God.

We should do our best to learn what is right and do what is good. But when it comes to other people, we should be humble and compassionate. And must never write someone off as beyond saving, for no one is beyond the love of God. That is the kind of judgment that Jesus forbids, and mercifully so, for nobody could survive that kind of judgment. None of us would ever be in the position to cast the first stone. The only one with those credentials is Jesus, and He has no desire to condemn us but rather invites us to receive His mercy and be transformed.

If we Christians are going to live a Sermon-on-the-Mount life, we have to do two things. We have to extend Jesus’s invitation to mercy by not condemning fellow sinners, and we have to learn to reject and condemn the sins that hurt them and us.

I often think about the people who write to strangers asking for life advice. Their stories sometimes move me to tears. I wonder why they have to turn to strangers. Are they lonely and have no one else they can trust? Are they looking for guidance and moral discernment that they haven’t found in society at large? Let’s be honest, “live and let live” is not a very satisfying moral mantra at the end of the day. It doesn’t help us live at all.

Sometimes the people who write to these columns are simply seeking validation that they are right and someone else is wrong. But many times, I get the sense that they are seeking compassion and mercy for themselves. They think they are looking for advice, but what they are really looking for is Jesus.

I admit that when I read these stories of people baring their souls, or at least confessing the difficulties they wrestle with, I long to invite them to church. I want to tell them that here is a place where we can be open and honest about our failures and our disappointments in life, because here is a place where we have Jesus. He is the One who can see through the labels the world has given us, Who can forgive us and set us on the right path again.

I have nothing against advice columns, but people would do better with real

community and real fellowship. Christ's Church is the place where people can find true joy in one another and also find the two things we all so desperately need. Mercy for our souls and moral guidance for our lives.

Jesus offers us both. He offers us compassion and mercy, and He calls us to incredibly high standards of behavior. He helps us understand and be gentle with other people in our lives by showing us that we are in no position to judge them. And he helps us understand ourselves by showing us the truth about ourselves and the planks we have in our own eye. So that we can confess, repent, be forgiven and transformed. So that we can be more like Him and live Sermon-on-the-Mount inspired lives.

To Him be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.