

To Look Again
LaGrave Ave Christian Reformed Church
August 8, 2021-AM Service
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Matthew 7:1-5,12

I would like to talk to you today about the problem of judgmentalism, harshly judging and condemning other people and groups of people. I believe we're in a pandemic of judgmentalism today—in our culture and in the church. Now I know people have always struggled with being too judgmental. One of the top perceptions unchurched people have of the church is that church people are judgmental, self-righteous, hypocritical; and therefore very unsafe. Jesus himself regularly confronted the religious people of his day for how they so harshly judged others. Where Jesus reached out in love to the Samaritan, the prostitute, the tax collector, the outsider, because he saw pain and need and fear, the religious community condemned, judged, persecuted, adding to the very same people's suffering and rejection. Yes, I know people have always struggled with being overly judgmental, including myself. But I believe we have a pandemic of judgmentalism today that goes beyond that normal, age-old struggle. In our polarized culture, if your reality is shaped by CNN news and you know someone who voted for Trump, or if your reality is shaped by FOX news and you know someone who actually liked Ruth Bader Ginsburg as a liberal Supreme Court justice, chances are good that you won't just see that person on the other side of this cultural divide as wrong, as misinformed. Chances are good, in this culture, that you'll see them as defective, as having something broken in their head and their heart and their soul. People today see a political yard sign and think they know everything about the person who lives there, and know enough to condemn them out of hand, even though they don't even know them!

And the truth is that the gospel of Jesus Christ seems powerless in the face of culture wars that besiege us today. The culture divide floats right into the church. Ministers are quitting the ministry today because they just don't see any fruitfulness from their years of labor when churches devolve into war zones over wearing or not wearing a mask; when political ideology (on all sides) functionally shapes Christians' identity and life purpose more than the historic Christian faith. We have a pandemic of judgementalism today.

Jesus says today, "Do not judge." Now, Jesus is not saying, 'Don't think, don't discern between what is right and wrong, just and unjust.' Jesus is not talking about exercising good judgment. Even from the Greek word translated "judge" it's clear that Jesus is talking being judgmental, which the dictionary defines as "tending to make quick and excessively critical judgments of others, especially moral ones." Judgmentalism involves a condemning spirit that personalizes disagreement, that crosses the line of honest differences of opinion to tearing down people, assaulting their dignity, questioning their motives, not giving people the benefit of the doubt. Jesus gives three reasons to not live that way.

First, a judgmental attitude comes back and judges you! Jesus says, "Do not judge or you too will be judged." When you are judgmental it starts a cycle of judgment, Judgmentalism is contagious and infects whole communities, denominations. Judgmentalism is toxic and can color all of your relationships—your marriage, your family, your church, your whole life. And then, Jesus' metaphor of the speck and the plank gives two additional reasons to not be judgmental.

First, you are not better than the person you are judging. Look in the mirror at that big old plank hanging out of your eye. And if you are judgmental, harshly critical, condemning, crushing of others' dignity, then you're worse than the one you judge. And then, you shouldn't be judgmental (the other reason we get from the speck and the plank) because you can't see that well. None of us see that well. We all have planks in our eyes. We have a full time job working on ourselves. Jesus says, when you get yourself squared away, then **"you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."** And of course, Jesus knows that when we come to grips with our own brokenness and desperate need for mercy, when we see the plank in our own eye, the truth about ourselves, then we will see others differently: with empathy, not judgment, compassion, not moral superiority, we'll see them the way Jesus sees them. Jesus says, do not judge, do not be judgmental, harshly condemning of others, because that judgmental spirit will come back and get you and infect everyone around you, because you are not better than other people, and because, until you have dealt with you, the plank in your own eye, you do not see clearly enough to be condemning of others.

One of the greatest privileges of my life has been a very recent one—co-teaching a Calvin University course in Christian Leadership two years ago to prisoners at Hanlon Prison in Ionia. 37 men in the class, most of them in prison for life. Talk about a group of people that it's easy to judge. And on the surface, with good reason: These prisoners have wrought immeasurable destruction and suffering on the lives of others. But three hours a week for nine weeks is a long time when you're all together trying to get to the bottom of things, especially with a group of people who have committed or recommitted their lives to Christ and are refreshingly honest about life. One of my biggest revelations from teaching that course was how many of these men grew up in Christian homes, with Christian parents, Christian grandparents, and in Christian churches, and very much identified as Christians—just like us. But then, you learn more about what went on in their homes, and on their streets and in their schools, and you hear about the models of manhood and fatherhood they grew up with, and you learn anew what a tiny margin for error these guys have, especially if their skin is brown. And you quickly figure out how dangerous it is, and wrong, to reduce a person to the worst ten seconds of their life, and to think you know enough about someone to just give them a label that explains them away and lets you go home justified. After teaching this course, it struck me that one of the reasons that the gospel is such good news for prisoners (we see that throughout the Bible, right?) is that Jesus doesn't reduce people to the worst ten seconds of their life. Jesus sees differently. He sees every person as having dignity, something most prisoners have long given up on seeing in themselves, much less expecting someone else to see in them. But now it shouldn't have taken me teaching a course in a prison to gain new eyes for seeing a prisoner.

Right? Most of you have had similar experiences: Why does it take a divorce in your own family to make you much less judgmental about people who are divorced, or a child with profound disabilities to make you more careful in your language about persons with disabilities, or one of your children adopting a baby of color to make you look at racism differently because now it's *your* grandchild being harmed by racism in our society. But we shouldn't have to go through such personal experiences before we become less judgmental. So how can we become less judgmental of "the other", and more generous, *before* we've had such personal experiences? Sometimes I wonder if we can. Trust me, I'm preaching to myself today more than I'm preaching to you. This is hard work. And it's not going well, is it?

But I don't want to give up on this. We can't! The witness of the church is at stake. And I don't want to give up on God. Yes, the fact is, ultimately this must be a work of God in our life and in the world. Only God can convict us when our ideologies have become our idols. Only God can give us new eyes to see a different world and to see the world differently—through eyes of Christ and through the lens of the kingdom of God. Only the Spirit can take away our anger and our fear, and make us kind and gentle—fruits of the Spirit. Yes, let's be clear, the main thing we must do to address this pandemic of judgmentalism is pray; because it will take a miracle, a work of God.

Having said that, I want to ask, are there things, practical things, we can do to make ourselves more hospitable to the work of the Spirit, more moldable by Christ, even though it's Christ and the Spirit who must ultimately do this work in us? I'd like to leave us with four simple, concrete suggestions that I think flow right out of Jesus' words today, and that I think can help us, encourage us. (I really want us to leave here encouraged today, not discouraged.)

Suggestion #1. James 1:19. "Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger." Slow down in reacting to other people, in sizing them up. This brings up my sermon title, "To Look Again." Someone pointed out to me recently that the word "respect" in its Latin roots literally means, "To Look Again." Our first look at someone else, our first reaction, is usually informed, mainly, by our preconceptions, our own previous experiences, maybe our prejudices, our associations, our related opinions. That's pretty inevitable. That's how the human mind works. That's why we need *to look again*. My first suggestion: Be quick to *listen*, *slow* to speak, and *slow* to anger. And "look again" before drawing any conclusions about anything.

Suggestion #2. Work at greater self-awareness—the plank in your own eye. Try to be honest about yourself and your vulnerabilities, your idols, your bias'. Honest at least with yourself, and with God, if not anyone else. Be honest about the worst ten seconds of *your* life. We're all broken. Not just "those people". In one of her books, Mother Teresa talks about radical humility, how, when we truly are honest with ourselves about ourselves and our need, it changes how we look at others. I like that term—radical humility. Suggestion #3 Practice generosity. Try to be more intentional about giving people grace, the benefit of the doubt. I love the Heidelberg Catechism's commentary on the 9th commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." LD 43 says, "I should do what I can to guard and advance my neighbor's good name." Now, when I'm in a situation where I think I'm right and someone else is wrong, I don't work overtime to guard and advance that person's good name. I want to win, and I want them to lose! How do we practice generosity with people we deeply disagree with? I find it helpful to think of other people who are examples. I think it's so interesting that Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, one of the most liberal judges on the court, and Justice Anthony Scalia, one of the most conservative judges on the court, were such great personal friends. Profound differences in their views on almost everything. But fair with each other's views, careful to not personalize, weaponize, distort, misrepresent quick to guard the other's good name. I find that friendship remarkable and inspiring and hopeful that I can do better!

Suggestion #4 Be curious about others. This goes with listening and looking again, and deep self-awareness, and generosity. Be curious about other people. About 30 years ago, soon after I had moved back to Grand Rapids, Neal Plantinga, who was a professor at Calvin Seminary at that time, called me and invited me to go with him and a few of his friends on a fishing trip. Neal knew that I was not a fisherman, I knew that Neal was not a fisherman, but Ken Kuiper was a fisherman, and Neal knew that Ken Kuiper and a couple of other people I didn't know would make it a great experience for all of us. Well, I said yes, but immediately was nervous about it. I didn't know Ken Kuiper personally, but I knew Ken Kuiper was one of the most loved and respected English professors in the history of the English department at Calvin College. Ken Kuiper taught American Literature. Well, people who teach literature intimidate me. Watch him ask me what my favorite three American novels are! Ernest Goes to Camp--Oh no, that's a movie! ☺ I really was nervous about this trip.

Ken Kuiper was one of the kindest, gentlest people I've ever met. Above all, he was curious. He was so interested in everyone else. He never made me feel stupid, or even ignorant, which are two different things. He always seemed to land on things that delight and humor, that encourage and inspire. And he did it all by just asking a lot of questions. He was a remarkable human being to be around. Every one of you, if you think about it, can come up with someone in your life who inspires you to be quick to listen, to look again, to be more self-aware, to embrace radical humility, to be more generous, more curious. We can do better, for in this spiritual battle, we face the one who is in us is stronger than the one who is in the world, the one who is in us is purer than the one who is in the world, and the one who is in us is brighter than the one who is in the world.

Go this morning with this rich blessing of God: May God, out of the Father's glorious riches, strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, so that you may bear fruit for the up building of the church, for the sake of the world, for the glory of God.