

National Junior High Sunday 2020

“Take the Log Out” based on Matthew 7:3-5

Sermon Notes

by Josh Brockway

We have all learned that it is not polite to point. We’ve probably learned by someone who told us that when we point at others, we have three fingers pointing back at ourselves. There are a range of images and metaphors like pointing fingers that help us examine ourselves before we confront others. The Gospels in particular give us several such reminders. “Do to others as you would have them to you” (Matthew 7:12, NRSV). “Do not judge so that you may not be judged” (Matthew 7:1, NRSV). “First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye” (Matthew 7:5, NRSV).

Matthew piled on the allusions to Moses in the opening of his gospel. Jesus survived an imperial edict that all infant males must die. He came out of Egypt to lead the Hebrew people. He wandered in the desert. And he climbed a mountain to deliver God’s instructions to the people. The Sermon on the Mount continued that echo of Moses and the law as Jesus addressed ethical questions about adultery, anger, divorce, oaths, retribution, and enemy love. And that is just is just chapter five!

This law from the mount, Jesus warned, was not a replacement for the Torah—God’s law— but it’s fulfillment. Those who break the law will be the least in the kingdom of heaven. To make this even more of a challenge, Jesus said that our righteousness in this law should exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees and scribes.

We are thrown off as readers in the opening of chapter seven with the negative imperative: Do not judge. All of these guidelines, expectations, and practices, how can we not judge?

Our modern religious imagination is infused with judgement. As the song said, “do this, don’t do that, can’t you read the sign.” We read religious instructions and understand ethical boundaries as rules that are either followed or broken. So, the natural response is to judge, or determine whether someone has obeyed or broken the laws.

Thankfully, Jesus went on to explain why - lest, you yourself be judged. One finger is pointing out the fault, while three fingers are pointing back. The injunction to not judge is not about judgement itself, but about hypocrisy. This is where the metaphor of a log and a speck illustrates the point.

To judge another, to name their fault, is not the issue. It is the assumption that we do so without any implication of ourselves in the process. As Augustine said in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, the hypocrites are pretenders “often moved by hatred and malice.” True accountability and discipleship involves discernment of both others and ourselves. It is a venture in mutuality in which we hold ourselves—individually and collectively—to the divine exceptions so that we may venture into holiness together. In naming sin or fault, I must necessarily work on myself as well.

This kind of log and speck aspect of judgement is one in which we must identify the driving force. Are we judging another out of power and malice, or as Augustine said, are we doing it “out of our common frailty, in order that mercy, not hatred, may lead us?”

Judgement in our culture today is not based on this log and speck kind of self-involvement. It is solely rooted in hatred, frustration, and an attempt to take a moral high ground over others. Chastened Christian judgement, rooted in discernment, invites us into the awareness that our own personal actions also miss the divine mark. It is a judgement that invites us and others into a mutually transformative experience where our sins are placed in the open so that the grace of Christ can redeem us both.

Jesus' metaphor of logs and sawdust in our eyes is not a call for relativism where anything goes. Nor is it an invitation into navel gazing where we internally rebuke ourselves over and over again. Rather, it is an invitation to work on ourselves together. It is a deeply social ethic of discerning discipleship, where we acknowledge our faults and prayerfully name our failures to follow the narrow road of Jesus towards merciful transformation in the likeness of Jesus.