

Removing the Religious Robes of Judgment

There's plenty of talk about how technology aids evangelism, but 21st century technology also opens the door to a myriad of creative ways to judge, criticize and condemn people.

You can jot judgmental remarks on a blog. You can e-mail critical comments. You can compose condemning words on Twitter (so long as you don't use more than 140 characters). You can relay your rebuke via text message. Or you can put them on blast by way of Facebook.

Of course, most of us are too sophisticated to launch outright public attacks against our brothers and sisters in Christ, even behind the cloak of technological tools that guarantee anonymity. More likely, we keep our disapproval of a friend's choice, the disparaging analysis of our pastor's message, or the dislike of our daughter's wardrobe in our thought life—or maybe we share it in confidence with our prayer partner so they can “touch and agree” on the thing with us.

Whether we judge, criticize and condemn publicly or keep the matter in our own hearts, God sees and hears it all. And every drop of scorn we pour on another is collecting in a bucket of belittlement that will one day tip over and drench us with detraction. In other words, as the Message Bible says, that critical spirit has a way of boomeranging.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus put it this way: “Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at 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,’ and behold, the log is 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 (Matt. 7:1-5 NASB).

Some years ago, I believe the Lord gave me a revelation of what that "log" is. It's a log of judgment. Here's the deal: Jesus didn't say we shouldn't try to get the speck out of our brother's eye. He just wants us to go about it with the right spirit. He wants us to get that log of judgment out of our eye so we can see clearly—through the eyes of love—to take the speck out of our brother's eye.

When we attempt to remove the speck out of our brother's eye with judgmental glasses on, we do more harm than good—both to our brother and to ourselves. We hurt our brother because instead of showing the kindness of God that will lead him to repentance, we come at him with a spirit of condemnation that causes him to put up his defenses and justify the ungodly behavior. And we hurt ourselves because our religious pride is setting us up for a fall.

Get this. Jesus said we don't even "notice" the log that is our own eye. We don't notice it because we're not examining ourselves. We're too busy examining others. As the Message translation puts it, it's easy to see the smudge on your neighbor's face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own. Do you have the nerve to say, "Let me wash your face for you" when your own face is distorted by contempt? Selah.

Jesus went on to call these contemptuous critics hypocrites. Now, we're not hypocrites because we are failing to fully live up to the true heart intention that comes out of our mouths. We're hypocrites when we are not trying wholeheartedly to live up to what comes out of our mouths. See the difference? It's an important one.

We all fall short of the glory of God. None of us are completely obedient. Not one. And we're not hypocrites if we

are striving for maturity, make a mistake, receive God's forgiveness, and run back to the battle line with more determination to conquer by His sufficient grace. Religious pride causes us not to notice the log in our eye, but to notice every little itty bitsy teeny tiny speck in everyone else's eyes—and judge them harshly for it.

Paul offered the appropriate response. If we follow this advice, we won't beat a brother down with the telephone pole that's sticking out of our eye and unwittingly set ourselves up for the same treatment: "Live creatively, friends. If someone falls into sin, forgivingly restore him, saving your critical comments for yourself. You might be needing forgiveness before the day's out. Stoop down and reach out to those who are oppressed. Share their burdens, and so complete Christ's law. If you think you are too good for that, you are badly deceived" (Gal. 6:1-3, The Message).

Now that we've cleared that up, let's look at the other side of the coin: how to respond when we are judged. The knee-jerk reaction is to put your defenses up, fight back, and make excuses. It's quite possible that the person who is judging you is so far off base that the game would be over by the time he walked back to the field. But one of my spiritual mentors taught me a valuable lesson: Even if someone is railing on you out of a completely wrong spirit, use it as an opportunity to glean any nugget of truth you can find—and grow.

In other words, stay humble, pray about what they said, examine your own heart, and use it as a tool to refine your character. When you do, you'll usually find an area where you can come up higher, whether that's merely in how you respond to the criticism when it first smacks you upside the head, or something deeper.

Remember the two men who went into the temple to pray? (Luke 18:10-14 NLT). One was a respected Pharisee and the other a despised tax collector. The Pharisee prayed a self-righteous

prayer, going so far as condemning the tax collector standing nearby. The tax collector, by contrast, wouldn't even lift his eyes when he prayed. He beat his chest in sorrow and asked God for mercy. God saw it all, and Jesus said, "I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

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