

The Melting of Judgement
Matthew 7:1-5

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February 19, 2017

As we have walked through the Sermon on the Mount these past few weeks the words of Jesus continue to both confound and challenge us in the most uncomfortable ways. In one moment he dishes out an incomparable helping of consolation for the tormented soul. The next moment his words are felt as cold water in the face. These words have never read easily.

Today is no different for his words come as a great unavoidable indictment: “Judge not, lest you be judged. What you dish out is what you shall receive in equal measure. Remove the log in your own eye before you try removing the spec from your neighbor’s.” Ouch! Where do we begin?

Perhaps we begin in the only place we can, with confession: “I have not lived up to this, Jesus. I have routinely judged others therefore making myself liable to judgment. I’ve blamed people for the same kinds of things I think and I do.

I am a master of projection and blame. I find every blemish in others even as I ignore my own. Woe is me. Forgive and restore.”

That is surely the best and only place to begin if we read the clear meaning of his teaching. And we need it. We need it now more than ever.

But let’s say that we have admitted just how culpable we are when it comes to judging others. Let’s say we are trying to remedy all that. Let’s say that we pray for a spirit of forgiveness and love and acceptance. Let’s pretend that we have walked down that path even if we haven’t walked *that* far. Remember what G.K. Chesterton wrote: “It’s not that Christianity doesn’t work; it’s that it hasn’t been tried.”

Even if it *has* been tried, a looming question remains, at least for those who also hold the value of justice as dear, as Jesus did. And the question is this: How do we define good and evil, virtue and vice, right and wrong path, unless we do, indeed, judge?

Take almost any moral or ethical issue of the day or one facing us and our personal situation and say, “Now, don’t judge. No matter what has been said or done, don’t judge.” Can we really respond that way?

When I was a young man and participated in the Boy Scouts our troop camped in Colorado almost every summer. We wilderness camped, constructed our own lean-tos, caught and ate our own fish, and drank our water from the lakes as we added purification tablets. We always climbed a mountain one of days we were there. We listened to the bears mucking about in the tall grass during the night.

One summer we arrived at what was to be our campsite only to discover that some other folks had beaten us to the area and were camping in their little RV. And as we arrived and looked around their campsite was covered with garbage and trash which they were just going to leave. The boys looked at one another and grimaced; we had been taught to respect the environment and always leave a campsite cleaner than we found it. We were indignant and distressed.

As it goes the head of their tribe, the trashy messy tribe, came to us and gathered us in to give us a little talking to. He had a genial, friendly manner to him. He talked quietly and thoughtfully, like one taking us into his confidence. And he said this:

“Now you boys probably go to church, at least most of you, and probably read the Bible, don’t you?” We all nodded and looked at one another as he reeled us in like mountain trout. “Well you know that teaching of Jesus where it talks about not judging others?” We nodded whether we did or not. “So you can see that judging us is wrong according to the Bible, right?” We looked out through wide, blinking eyes. “Okay then, we’ll be out of here in a while and it’s all yours.” And they were out of there in a little while and did leave all their trash behind which we dutifully cleaned up.

As a fifteen year old Boy Scout I was not as theologically nimble as I would become later. If I were placed in that same situation now I would say something like,

“Well, there is a difference between judging someone as a condemnation and making judgements. We all have to make judgements about the right thing to do, whether in be in our personal lives or on the social stage. So we have to make judgements about what comprises the moral life, including judgements about what is right and good for the environment. Any kind of environmental degradation is an offence against God and humanity. What would be wrong in that case is staying silent in the face of injustice, allowing it to continue or persist. That, however, is different than judging a person as worthless, evil, or beyond God’s mercy. Those, Sir, are two different things.”

Indeed, there is a difference between making moral judgments and judging others. Once we know that difference we can be free to engage even more with Jesus’ teaching, because as you know, Jesus made moral judgements all the time and frequently he was not kind about it.

So let’s just put the necessity of making moral judgements to the side, accepting that we must and

that ignoring that would in fact be irresponsible. With that to the side let’s return to Jesus’ words about judging others.

To judge another, to condemn or demonize another is to place ourselves over them, over another creature, as though we are God. And we are not God, not in the slightest. Judging another with that kind of condemnation is an act of self-idolatry, full of pride and revealing our lack of humility.

We not only condemn others because of our outsized pride, but because of ignorance, an inadequate perspective. If you live long enough you realize just how often you have had it wrong about others. We simply don’t know enough about another person or culture or situation to know why something is the way it is or why a person does what he or she does. The more we become aware of just how little we do know the more cautious we are about judging others.

Are you familiar with Edwin Abbott’s sci-fi book, *Flatland*?

In this strange world flat creatures inhabit a two-dimensional existence and have no idea of the third dimension of up and down. No matter their two-dimensional shape, their line of sight only reveals a straight line in this two-dimensional plane. The hero of the story is a square, and he is routinely baffled by a sphere that approaches that requires more than two dimensions. He simply cannot comprehend the additional dimension.

To every Flatlander their world is two dimensional. That is their “given” reality and no matter how intelligent any one shape is he cannot imagine something beyond two dimensions.

We three-dimensional beings know just what a deficit of understanding they have. After all, we see so much more. Flatlanders are blind to what seems obvious to us. But what do we seem like to the creature that perceives four or five dimensions? Are we not like Flatlanders to them? There are basic properties of time and space that are beyond our comprehension.

Being a Flatlander is a relative thing; we might seem just as limited and even comical to some higher form of intelligence. And that alone should evoke some measure of humility in us.

The truth is that for us Flatlanders there is much more unknown than known, and when it comes to judging others, presuming we are superior to others, we skate on some very thin ice.

That’s why that Jesus says that the judgment we dish out is the judgment we receive. This is the way of reciprocity that we see lots of other places in Jesus’ teaching.” Forgive so you shall be forgiven. Love as you wish to be loved”. Or as Francis of Assisi put it in his extra mile kind of way, “Seek to understand more than to be understood.”

To get us there Jesus uses the image that won’t let us go: Take the two-by-four out of your own eye before trying to remove the spec from another’s.

- For one, you can't see another clearly through your own deficit.
- For two you can't really help as long as it is that way.
- And for three it's always going to be that way so you might as well begin right now redirecting all that energy to correcting your own eye-planked nature.

Do we have to make judgements about what is just, right and true? We most certainly do. It is part of our responsibility as free moral agents in the world.

But once we Flatlanders become acutely aware of our own limits of perception and knowledge, we become ever more cautious about assuming the position of God over another and judging and condemning them.

The only time it is permissible to act as God over another is in imitating the ways that God loves them. That is always permissible.