

Judging, Condemning, and Self Reflection  
Matthew 7:1-5

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“It looks to me as if you might have a wee bit of a drinking problem, friend. I was watching you toss them back at the party on Saturday.”

It’s Monday morning, and your colleague Steve has sauntered up to you in the hallway at work to make this remark. And in fact, for the first time in your life, you did drink too much, you don’t quite remember everything that happened on Saturday night, but you sure felt wretched on Sunday morning. Didn’t even go to church. So now God’s going to find out, because of course God is taking attendance.

But the thing you know about Steve is that he is a raging alcoholic and can’t or won’t admit it. He thinks nothing of downing three drinks over lunch on a weekday and is usually pretty worthless in the afternoons, staring glassy-eyed at his computer screen or even snoozing at his desk. So for him to tell you that you have a drinking problem? Well, that’s a bit rich. You could try to point out that he’s one to talk, but you already know he’s in complete denial of his own problem, even though it is about to get him fired. You may have a speck in your eye, but he’s got a log and can’t even see it.

We’re going to explore this passage from Matthew from two perspectives: one who has the speck and one who has the log. We may see a bit of ourselves in each of these.

I was wrestling for a while with the word “judge” in this reading. Are we not to judge anything ever? Judging is something that humans often do very well. It’s about making decisions, labeling things, classifying them, *judging* them to be good or bad, useful or a waste of time. We make

judgments every day—about what we will wear, whether these socks go with this outfit, whether this movie was well done or trash, and so on.

So it's less about making decisions, or using discernment, or having good judgment. In this scripture passage, I take the word "judge" more in the sense of "condemn." It's about what we do to or think about other people. "Do not condemn, so that you may not be condemned." We often do not know why people make the choices they do, or what else they are dealing with in their lives. It's not for us to judge them.

Two thoughts about this business of the speck and the log. First, who are we to judge or condemn someone else? And second, what do our judgments say about ourselves?

Take that first idea: Who are we to judge or condemn? Sometimes when people come to see me about a pastoral care issue, they will tell me something they have done, and they will project judgment onto me. They will say, "No doubt you think I was an idiot to do such a thing...." But in fact I'm not there to judge. That's not my job. My job is to listen and to reflect with them about matters of their spirit, to offer any insights that might emerge. But judging is not part of my job description, and I try to avoid it. I am not there to tell them, "Wow, what you did is so bad, I don't think even God could forgive you. You are clearly going to hell." Yeah, you will never hear those words come out of my mouth.

Which is not to say I never judge anybody. Let's be honest: We all do. It's human nature, as I said. But we are reminded in today's reading that it's not up to us to decide for others whether God loves them and forgives them. In fact, the message in scripture is always that God loves us all, no matter what, and forgives us whenever we ask. If God forgives, then who are we to condemn?

Which knocks on its head the idea that the Church can set itself up to tell anyone they are going to hell—if you even believe that hell exists. And yet plenty of churchy people have taken it upon themselves throughout

the centuries to tell young children they will go to hell because they swore in church or thought dirty thoughts; or to tell lovers they are going to hell because they slept together without getting married first, or because they happen to be of the same gender. But in fact, what people do is between them and God, and churchy people need to butt out with their condemnation.

Then there's that second idea: What do our judgments or condemnations of others actually say about *us*? How do we learn to see the log in our own eye? In his book *Engaging the Powers*, Walter Wink writes about this passage on the speck and the log:

This is the earliest known teaching of projection. We have scarcely begun to trace the implications of Jesus' discovery of projection; his entire understanding of evil is the fruit of it. The "splinter" in the other's eye is a chip off the same log that is in one's own eye. We see in the other what we would not see in ourselves. But why is it a *log* in the eye of the beholder? Normally we say, "I may be (somewhat bad—a splinter), but *that* person is (really bad—a log)." Why has Jesus inverted that conventional way of putting it? Because the log in my eye totally blinds me. I can see nothing objectively. Remove the log, and I can see to help my neighbor remove his or her splinter. [Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 271.]

Let's put this in a larger context for a moment. Who gets to judge who is a security threat to the US, and what does it say about our country when that judgment, that condemnation, gets out of hand? For the past week, thousands of legal immigrants have run into prolonged security checks and have in some cases been turned back, sometimes after waiting for years to come here legally, because a new rule has come out judging them as "other" and therefore not welcome here. People trying to come to this country legally go through extensive vetting—lots of opportunity for judgment about their character. Making a blanket and paranoid judgment to refuse entry to all of them creates more ill will than it does

to solve some unsubstantiated security problem. We as a nation are now building walls instead of bridges, making enemies instead of friends. In our new national fear of Muslims, we have become most un-Christian in our treatment of the sojourners at our gates. I fear we will reap the consequences for decades to come.

What happens when we stop judging and start trying to understand people? What happens when we reflect on the logs in our own eyes? Imagine the cranky, judgmental guy in this sculpture looking in a mirror one day and seeing, with his good eye, this enormous log sticking out of his other eye. Jesus often holds up a mirror to us and asks us to look. If we want to judge anyone, start here.

But don't go overboard. Sometimes we can be our own harshest critics. Be honest *and compassionate*. A few weeks ago, guest preacher Debra Jarvis talked about a friend who invited the critical voice in his head into conversation. This is the concept of God's grace: yes, we are flawed—sometimes deeply flawed—but work through it, get over it, heal. Don't get stuck there. And sometimes that flawed place, when it heals, can be your place of greatest strength. It no longer has power over you as a deep dark secret that can bring you down.

Think of people who own their flaws publically. Nadia Bolz-Weber had an addiction problem as a young woman. She looked in the mirror, saw it for what it was, got herself clean—with a lot of help—and now is a Lutheran minister. Her ministry draws strength out of her profound understanding of addiction and brokenness. We are all flawed, and God loves us anyway. She offers concrete hope, from her own experience, that people can come out the other side of their addictions and have meaningful, productive, redeemed lives.

Nadia Bolz-Weber writes,

My spirituality is most active, not in meditation, but in the moments when:

I realize God may have gotten something beautiful done through me despite the fact that I am [a jerk],  
and when I am confronted by the mercy of the gospel so much that I cannot hate my enemies,  
and when I am unable to judge the sin of someone else (which, let's be honest, I *love* to do) because my own crap is too much in the way...  
and when I end up changed by loving someone I'd never choose out of a catalog but whom God sends my way to teach me about God's love. [Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People* (New York: Convergent Books, 2015), 9.]

Walter Wink talks about learning to find common ground with our enemies, the ones we want to fix by taking specks out of their eyes. He suggests making a list of the characteristics of your enemy. Then go down that list and figure out how many of those characteristics are also true of you. And then take those insights into your prayer and meditation to see what they have to teach us about ourselves. One pastor had a lay leader in the church who was driving him crazy because the lay leader needed to control everything that went on at the church. When the pastor made this list of the lay leader's characteristics, he realized they *both* needed to feel in control. The lay leader had run a dairy farm his whole adult life, milking 500 cows a day. Now in his mid-60s, he had just retired and was feeling that maybe he didn't have control of things in his life anymore. So he was trying to control everything at his church, which was putting him in conflict with the pastor.

A woman who did this exercise listed as her enemy the president, who at the time was Ronald Reagan. What she and Reagan had in common was self-righteousness. She wanted to be right and to do what was right so that God would love her. It was very difficult to realize that maybe she and Reagan had this self-righteousness trait in common.

Do we dare to go there? To think of someone who is our enemy, whether that be a political leader or someone we know personally, and to reflect on what we might actually have in common? How does our enemy do us the favor of helping us discover that log in our own eye?

And what changes when we recognize that log and deal with it? When we dare to be honest about whatever we have been projecting onto someone else and condemning them for, and then turn the mirror around and see that we are the ones with the problem?

“It looks to me as if you might have a wee bit of a drinking problem, friend. I was watching you toss them back at the party on Saturday.”

It’s Monday morning, and your colleague Steve has sauntered up to you in the hallway at work to make this remark. But the thing you know about Steve is that he has been in recovery for seven years now. He attends AA meetings on his lunch break several times a week and has pulled his life together. You know that if you need help, he can steer you to resources and walk alongside as you pull your life back together.

In this version of the scenario, Steve has seen the log in his own eye and dealt with it. It is out of his place of healing that he can dare to suggest there is a speck in your own eye. But how different it is in this scenario, because now instead of condemning, he is holding out his hand to help. That’s not judging. That’s loving. That’s grace. That’s God. May we accept the offer to see the log in our own eye and learn how to heal that broken place in ourselves. And then, may we stand in that healed space and invite others to join us there, help them find their way to it. Amen.