

# How to handle criticism: Jesus on judging

Extreme Makeover: Soul Edition (Episode 7)

Matthew 7:1-5

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 10 July 2005

## Introduction

Fifty people killed. Seven hundred wounded. The terrorist strike in London this week has provoked outrage all around the world. Helen Clark was just stating the obvious really when she said, "Nothing justifies the murder of innocent civilians." No one is allowed to take the law into his or her own hands. Yet often we do. I was reading an article this week about the abuse of prisoners in Iraq by American forces. Apparently, some of the abuse in Iraq has involved vigilante justice – American soldiers taking the law into their own hands, and punishing those Iraqi prisoners who they believed – whether rightly or wrongly – were guilty of raping a female American soldier, Jessica Lynch. Vigilante justice can be fast and effective. But it's dangerous, and wrong, because it lacks the element of "due process." Questions don't get asked. People jump to conclusions. And the wrong guy can end up swinging on the end of a rope.

Now I bring this up because we've been doing a series on the Sermon on the Mount and the section that we're looking at today is Jesus' attempt to move his followers away from that kind of relational vigilante justice. He's painfully aware of our human tendency to string each other up – or blow each other up – with few if any questions asked. He's attempting in this passage to establish some principles of due process. Let me read it: Matthew 7:1-5.

## Do not judge

The first three words – "Do not judge" must be three of the most misunderstood words Jesus ever spoke. Jesus is *not* saying here: "Suspend your powers of judgment. Don't make any assessments about anyone's character or conduct." You can tell that from the context. Immediately after this passage, Jesus says in v 6: "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs." So be discriminating about the kind of people with whom you share your advice or convictions. And a little later in v 15 he says, "Watch out for false prophets ... By their fruit you will recognise them." In other words, look at their conduct, their relational patterns, their behaviour when the spotlights are off, and assess whether they're telling you the truth. Exercise discernment. Exercise judgment.

So what then is Jesus prohibiting when he says here, "Do not judge"? The word translated "judge" can mean either "evaluate" and "analyse," or it can mean "condemn" or "despise." Jesus is using it in the latter sense here. He's saying, "Don't condemn. Don't adopt a critical, faultfinding attitude. Don't be quick to label and dismiss. Stop the vigilante justice – stop hanging people on the gallows of your mind without due process, without asking the proper questions. Gary Larson captures the kind of attitude Jesus is prohibiting in one of his cartoons: "After many years of marital bliss, tension enters the Kent household." (Clark Kent is in the lazy-boy reading *The Daily Planet*, while Lois, his wife, embroiders onto his superman suit: "S" for "Stupid." Jesus is saying, "Stop writing people off as stupid." This kind of sneering, scornful attitude is so explosively destructive. It kills marriages and families and workplaces and churches. And if you judge like this, "you too will be judged."

There's a story about a man who appears at the pearly gates. St Peter asks him, "Have you ever done anything of particular merit?" The man replies, "I can only think of one thing. Once I came upon a gang of high-testosterone bikers who appeared to be threatening a young woman. So I approached the largest and most heavily tattooed biker. I smacked him in the head, kicked his bike over, ripped out his nose ring and threw it on the ground, and said to him, "Leave her alone or you'll have to answer to me." Suitably impressed, St Peter asks him, "When did this happen?" "A couple of minutes ago." If we're judgmental and harsh in our appraisal of others, they'll probably be judgmental and harsh in their appraisal of us. But when Jesus says, "Don't judge or you too will be judged," he is probably not thinking so much about the judgment of others as the judgment of God. He's saying, "Condemn others, despise others, and you're violating God's law – the law of love. One day, on judgment day, you will have to stand before him and be held to account.

So in this passage Jesus says, "When you're assessing people, follow instead the principles of due process." And he outlines those principles in the verses that follow. Let's quickly run through them.

## **1. Judge others in exactly the same way that you yourself would want to be judged.**

The first principle of relational due process is tucked away in v 2: "For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." You could phrase it this way: the first step in due process is to judge others in exactly the same way that you yourself would want to be judged. A few years back I received a phone call from someone who was angry with me. Really angry. She took issue with something she said that I'd done to someone else. But the thing was, she'd never once spoken to me and got my side of the story. It turns out she didn't have all the facts at all. But that didn't stop her stringing me up. Exploding all over me. It wasn't much fun. I'd much rather people took the time to get all the facts before they make their assessments of me. Wouldn't you? That then is how we should proceed when making our assessments of others.

Chuck Swindoll was once preaching at a Christian camp. The first day there a man approached him and said how much he had been looking forward to hearing Dr. Swindoll speak. That evening Swindoll noticed the man sitting near the front. But only a few minutes into the message the man was sound asleep. Snoring like a baby. (Happens to me all the time when I'm speaking.) Swindoll thought to himself, "Perhaps he was tired after a long day's drive and couldn't help himself." But the same thing happened the next few nights, and Dr. Swindoll found his exasperation with the man growing – until the last night. The man's wife came up and apologized for her husband's inattention during the messages. She explained, "He's recently been diagnosed with terminal cancer and the medication he's taking to ease the pain makes him extremely sleepy. But it had been one of his life-long ambitions to hear you speak before he died, and now he's fulfilled that goal." Appearances can be deceiving. A little while back a friend emailed me a list of wise proverbs. One of them went like this: "Before you judge someone, you should walk a mile in their shoes. That way, when you judge them, you're a mile away and you have their shoes." There's some wisdom in that. Walk a mile in their shoes. Get to know them before you judge them. It's so easy for young people to look at older people and think, "They're so expressionless and dull in their worship. They seem so stale in their faith." But if young people would just take the time to get to know some older people around here, they'd learn about what it means to serve Jesus faithfully, sacrificially, over many years. Appearances can be deceiving. The point is judge others in the exact same way you wish to be judged.

## **2. Judge others with an awareness of our human tendency to be far more critical of others than we are of ourselves**

In vv 3-4 you can see the second principle of due process: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?" Here's how you could phrase this second principle: Judge others with an awareness of our human tendency to be far more critical of others than we are of ourselves. It's quite a picture Jesus paints here. A guy with a two-by-four completely blocking his vision and he's got his tweezers out, trying to take a speck out of someone else's eye. Imagine a blind optometrist. The picture is absurd. That's why Jesus paints it. He's saying: "Do you realise how absurd it is for people like us – fallible, failure-prone, blind-as-can-be people – to stand in judgment over anyone else?"

The classic example of this in the Bible comes from 2 Samuel 11, where king David, at the height of his reign, has a palace full of wives and concubines. But one day he sees a remarkably attractive woman bathing next door. Her name is Bathsheba. He invites her to the palace. They have an affair. He has her husband murdered. He marries her. And David doesn't lose a wink of sleep over the whole deal. Months later, a prophet named Nathan comes to talk to with David about a difficult legal case. He says, in effect, "O wise King, I need your advice on a difficult legal case that I'm handling. Will you help me?" David says, "No problem." So Nathan says, "Here are the facts of the case. There is a very wealthy landowner who lives next door to a really poor guy. The guy is so poor he owns just one sheep, a little lamb. It's like a pet. It eats at the family table and sleeps in the kids' bed. But the wealthy farmer had an unexpected guest drop by for dinner one night. Rather than kill a lamb from one his own vast flocks, he walks right into the poor guy's house, grabs the little pet lamb out of the kids' arms, takes it back to his place, slaughters it, and feeds it to his guest. Now, wise King, what sentence should this guy get?" Barely able to control his anger, David shouts, "He deserves to die. Who is this man?" Nathan replies, "It's you. You have just done the very same thing with a woman named Bathsheba." And David comes face to face with the dark propensity in all of us to see the evil in other people's lives while being blinded to our own. I like how John Stott puts it when judging or appraising others: "We need to be as critical of ourselves as we often are of others, and as generous to others as we always are to ourselves." So when you're tempted to get the tweezers out, push the pause button and first ask yourself: "Have I ever said, done or thought the exact same thing?" Most of the time I have – or worse.

### 3. Judge others only after a sober self-evaluation, and then proceed very cautiously

The third and final principle of due process comes in v 5: "You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." In other words, judge others only after a sober self-evaluation, and then proceed very cautiously. I guess it's no accident that Jesus uses the analogy of an eye. There's no organ in the body that's more sensitive. It doesn't take much to blind someone. That's why the apostle Paul writes to Timothy: "Correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Tim 4:2). Assessing and correcting someone is a delicate operation. It takes great patience, careful instruction, and should always be combined with encouragement.

A few weeks back I received a letter from someone here at church. She was pointing out a mistake that she felt I'd made. The letter started off: "Please don't take this as negative criticism. It's intended more as positive advice. I've thought a lot about what happened. I realise that your intentions were good, but this is why I think you were wrong. This is why I feel I need to write to you. And here's my suggestion to help you do better in the future." Before I'd finished reading the letter, the dark side of me had manufactured six reasons why I wasn't wrong and she was. My industrial strength justifying juices were flowing like a river. But as I reflected on that letter, I was struck by the warm tone with which it had been written. This woman had clearly given the matter considerable thought, and approached the matter with humility and loving concern for me. The outcome, as you can imagine, was a good one. My respect for her is now even greater than it was before. And I've benefited from the wisdom of her advice. It's win-win all round because she didn't execute vigilante justice, but followed the due process principles that Jesus laid out in this text.

What about you? Are you engaging in any vigilante justice? Have you condemned and sentenced anyone in the courtroom of your mind. Is there anyone for whom you feel nothing but contempt and scorn whenever you think about them? Maybe it's a group of people: old people, young people, people with different ideas about worship, people with different political convictions or sexual orientation. Jesus says, there's a better way. The better way is to judge others in the exact same way you yourself would want to be judged. To judge others with that full awareness that we tend to be more critical of others than we are of ourselves. And to judge others only after a sober self-evaluation and then to do so cautiously, gently. If we all made a commitment to that better way today, think how much richer our relationships and sense of community would be among our families and friendships and church. I think we ought to commit ourselves to that better way. All those in favour say, Aye." The majority has it. Let's all do it.

#### Questions

1. What does Jesus mean when he says, "Do not judge"? See Romans 14:10.
2. There's a scene in *The Simpsons* where Homer asks his Christian neighbours where they've been and they answer, "We went away to Christian camp. We were learning how to be more judgmental." Why are Christians viewed as being judgmental?
3. What are the consequences of being judgmental?
4. How have you ever been guilty of vigilante justice? Ever seen it in action?
5. "I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least" (Dorothy Day). Discuss.
6. Do you tend to judge others in the same way you yourself would want to be judged?
7. In what ways do you tend to be more critical of others than you are of yourself?
8. Jesus suggests we judge others only after a sober self-evaluation and then to do so cautiously, gently. Can you think of a time when someone treated you in this way?
9. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote: "Nothing can be more cruel than the leniency which abandons others to their sin." Do you agree?
10. Discuss this comment by Jean Vanier: "Communities need tensions if they are to grow and deepen. Tensions come from conflicts... A tension or difficulty can signal the approach of a new grace of God. But it has to be looked at wisely and humanly."