

Mercy triumphs over judgement

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- [0 : 00] Morning everyone. Today's reading is going to be from Matthew chapter 7 and we'll be reading verses 1 to 12. Judge not that you be not judged, for with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.
- Why do you see 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 own eye?
- And then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.
- Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you. Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened to you.
- For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?
- [1 : 05] Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father, who is in heaven, give good things to those who ask him?
- So whatever you wish that others would do to you, also do to them. For this is the law of the prophets. Well, why don't we pray before we get into God's word?
- Would you pray to me? Our father, we've all got lots of things in our minds, whether exciting things, joyful things, or whether trouble in our life.
- I just pray that you would help us to focus on your word now. Help us to sit under your, what you want us to hear. Lord, especially as it comes to judging, Lord, we want to be people who are full of your mercy and truth.
- And so please help us to be more like you. Please speak to us now and give us energy and a desire to hear. I pray in Jesus' name.
- [2 : 18] Amen. Well, apparently Matthew 7, verse 1 is the most Googled, the most well-known verse in all of the Bible.
- Judge not, lest you be judged. So the most famous verse, it's not Romans 6, 23 or John 3, 16. Do not judge is one message from Jesus that our current culture is delighted to hear.
- Don't criticize. Don't call something wrong. Otherwise, you're a hypocrite judging when Jesus said not to. When I was a scripture teacher, I visited lots of different churches who supported me as a scripture teacher.
- On particular occasion, there was a Q&A session. The first question I got was, do I believe in hell? Well, second question, do I believe homosexuality is a sin?
- After my attempt at a careful, grace-filled answer, you can guess what the argument back was. Doesn't Jesus say not to judge? Don't judge.
- [3 : 32] It feels like a knockout argument. It's assumed that Jesus is advocating for the tolerant live and let live ethic of our day. As if it's unloving to call anything someone does wrong.

There's a deep mistrust and suspicion of anyone who claims to have an ultimate authority, an ultimate standard that a person's life can be evaluated by.

Because if a person doesn't fit within that ultimate overarching standard, then they're on the outside, they're rejected, they're condemned.

To have an ultimate standard, therefore, is oppressive in our culture's thinking. The solution? Live and let live. I'll let you do whatever you think is right, whatever you think is good, and you let me do the same.

This is the ultimate standard that will protect everyone's freedom to live as they think is best. Anything else is judgmental. And I think this belief of our times has crept into the church.

[4 : 44] Even while we say with our lips that Jesus and his word is the authority on all matters, we have this thinking, live and let live, even within the church.

So for me personally, giving sermons, I struggled for a long time with receiving constructive feedback from my sermons, as if criticism was dismissing me as a person.

Or consider Bible study. Do you find it a little awkward, that small group, if someone's contribution about what they think the Bible passage means is challenged?

Do we sense that it's unloving to say a person is wrong? We say the Bible is the authority, and yet all disagreement is put in this category of being unloving.

Or in relationships, when a brother or sister shares what they're going through in life, and you feel that they just need a different perspective. But do you feel paralyzed to say anything?

[5 : 48] Because to say anything would be judging. All you have to do is affirm and sympathize. I think part of the motivation is, I won't say you're doing anything wrong, so that you can't tell me that I'm doing anything wrong.

Or this thinking, let me ask you this way. Do you appreciate the community at church? Do you appreciate the community equally for the encouragement you receive, as much as the accountability that a community holds you to?

I think this live and let live ultimate ethic is in our minds and in our hearts and in the church, and we call it showing grace.

But do you see the irony? By making live and let live, don't judge me, only love me. By making live and let live the ultimate standard to measure people by.

Anyone who doesn't live according to the live and let live ethic, who claims there is a higher authority that we all must answer to, they are rejected and condemned.

[7 : 07] The live and let live spirit of our times is just as judgmental and oppressive. If you don't believe me, just read a few comment threads on social media.

We need a better way. We need an ultimate standard that tells us what's right and wrong, what is good and what is evil.

But an ultimate standard that isn't used as a back to beat people down with. And one that promotes humility and loving help. We need both truth and mercy together.

So let's come to our passage. What does Jesus say true mercy is? Well, the first thing Jesus says, true mercy is not judgmental.

Let's hear Jesus' hilarious but piercing parable again, verses 3 to 5. If you have your Bibles with you, have a look at verse 3.

[8 : 15] Why do you see 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 when there is the log 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. True love, true mercy.

First of all, it's not judgmental. Being judgmental is to be fault-finding. It's to be severely critical of others.

It's an attitude I think we can smell in someone a mile away. But it's not easy to define. It can be expressed in a facial expression.

It can be in a piercing joke. It can be a harsh word. It can be silence. It can be a harsh sermon. It's a spirit. It's an attitude.

[9 : 21] But it's not the seriousness of the criticism that makes something judgmental. It's when something is said without mercy and love for the person and then it becomes judgmental.

It is the posture of sitting up in the judge's bench with your fellow brother or sister below you in the dock, pronouncing wrongdoing on their path. I think this grace-less throwing the law at people, sitting in judgment, can come from three places.

First, I think it can come when we think we are excelling when that person is failing. Like maybe do we ride someone off as not serious about their faith because they haven't attended small group or church in a while?

Maybe we're critical and ride someone off about their spiritual maturity because of their lack of Bible knowledge compared to my own. Or telling someone who confides in you that they are struggling with lust and just telling them pray and have self-control.

Pluck out your eye if necessary. All these conclusions lack mercy. They lack a context of grace. They lack any actual help.

[10 : 42] Thinking that simply laying God's law down will help a person. You can only lay God's law down and think it helps if you think you're doing okay at keeping that law.

I think a second place that a judgmental spirit comes from is similar to the first, but it's when we're failing as well. If I'm loaded down with guilt and shame myself, my words can come out even stronger.

This too is a lack of mercy, first towards myself and then towards my brother or sister. It's like trying to turn up the dial on God's law as if more law will produce change.

But we ourselves can't stand the heat. So we put that heat on someone else and think we're more righteous by doing that. I think the third place a judgmental spirit can come from is envy, is jealousy.

Let me use the movie Chocolat to illustrate. So there's the religious mayor of the town and he is observing the religious fast during Lent.

[11 : 59] But others in the town are just indulging in eating chocolate rather than obeying the religious festival. So he is criticising severely and he starts despairing and he's praying, what do I do for these people to help them?

And he comes up with an idea. He breaks into the chocolate shop and starts smashing all the chocolate, destroying it so that people can't have it until a bit of chocolate lands on his lip.

He tastes it. And then he just goes to town. He just shoves it all in his mouth, literally rolling in the chocolate. And he's lying there miserable that he too has failed.

And yet he's just got exactly what he wants. If we actually desire sin, and I'm not saying chocolate is a sin, by the way, but when we desire sin, but we think God's ways are restricting us from that sin that we actually want, and we just do God's ways begrudgingly, we condemn everyone else who isn't even trying to be self-controlled.

So whether it's feeling like we're excelling or when we feel like we're failing, so we come down harder on people, or maybe when we're envious, they're sinning in ways we wish we could.

[13 : 25] Jesus criticised the Pharisees in Matthew 23, 4.

You tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but you yourselves are not willing to move them with a finger. You do nothing to help.

Repeating God's standards, saying you should do better. God's standards without any true mercy just places a heavier, merciless burden on people. All the while, we have a two-by-four plank sticking out of our eye, and we go, hey, please, that I help my brother out.

Sadly, our culture's criticism of Christians being judgmental, wielding God's standards without mercy is sometimes true. So if coming down hard with God's law isn't the answer, we naturally think the opposite is a solution.

Reduce God's law. Get rid of it. And so we ignore sin. And I think we're probably more prone to this these days, or most of us are anyway. We commit it.

[14 : 42] And we think we are applying Christian grace. Notice in the passage, Jesus doesn't say that there is no speck in your brother's eye.

There is a problem. There is a splinter in the eye. A foreign body is there. It doesn't belong in your brother's eye. It is causing damage.

The story ends with Jesus affirming that you should feel responsible for taking the splinter out of your brother's eye. Maybe we are aware of the depths of our own sinfulness, the plank in our eye, and so we conclude, well, what right do I have to tell them to live differently?

But that can't be the problem Jesus is addressing here. Otherwise, none of us would be able to help anyone else. True mercy can't be about ignoring others' sin.

God doesn't ignore sin. Jesus isn't telling us to switch off our critical thinking, to not be discerning. True love, true mercy requires you to see the worst in a person.

[16 : 02] You can't diagnose and then help a brother unless you are first willing to see the worst in a brother or sister. So true mercy, it's not being judgmental, coming down hard with God's law, but it's not ignoring sin either.

We might think we need to balance these two as if they're opposites. Some Christians take God's law too seriously, others are too relaxed. But Sinclair Ferguson, he calls these two attitudes, I really like this phrase, they are non-identical twins that emerge from the same womb.

They are non-identical twins that emerge from the same womb. I think that same womb is what Jesus exposes when he talks about prayer in verses 7 to 11.

This bit about prayer, it can't be an instruction on prayer because we've already got the Lord's Prayer in chapter 6. There's a much deeper point Jesus is making here. These verses challenge both the person who wields God's law judgmentally and the one who does away with God's law as if it's restrictive.

Both these people conclude that God and God's ways are not good. It forces us to ask the question, how do I see the character of God only as a judge who reluctantly gives blessing if I obey, who can't be relied upon to give life?

[17 : 48] Or do I see God as a father full of mercy who only gives me good? So let me read it again.

Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be open to you. But everyone who asks receives and the one who seeks finds and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him?

For those of you who know me, I wonder if you realise just how self-absorbed I actually am. I thought I was a patient man until I had to look after a child.

When Sam was real young, sometimes I had to put him down and just walk away because I was just so frustrated and angry. And yet you all expect me to look after Sam.

[19 : 06] And so you should. Or maybe you don't expect me to now that I've admitted that. I've never given him pebbles for dinner or mouse bait.

Although this morning he was trying to eat pebbles in our driveway. But we don't give it to him on purpose. You expect me to look after my child even though I am not a good man.

And yet when it comes to our heavenly father, what do you expect to receive from him? We pray and sometimes we don't expect a response.

We desperately long for what we think will give us life and when we don't get it, we conclude God mustn't want to give me life. Or maybe you do believe in the power of prayer and you're too afraid of what God might take away from you to give you more life in knowing Jesus better.

You might think that so many of my prayers go unanswered. I'm starting to like that. I'm starting to dislike that term unanswered.

[20 : 20] I don't think the problem is silence from heaven. I think it is answered and the answer is no. No, I won't give you that. I love you too much.

I have the best, the good life to give you. Is there something in you like there is in me that is suspicious of what Jesus calls good things promised here?

we know it's not promising a Ferrari if we pray for it. We don't go as far as to say that God is lying in this passage.

I think we just conclude oh, he means heavenly gifts, spiritual things. What's so good about that? our father is so patient with us, isn't he?

He has given us the best. In fact, our father has given us all that is actually good, everything that he's got to give.

[21 : 23] He's given us his only son. He has filled us with his Holy Spirit. While angels look on from a distance, we are brought into the family of God that we might be his treasured possession.

Knowing the judge of the earth, not afraid, but as a loving father. Knowing the one with all power is using all of it to give us life. Knowing his constant stream of mercy all of the time, wherever we are, whatever's happening.

Do you think you can stop being judgmental on your own? Do you think that naturally you can show mercy to others? If we've learnt anything from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, one thing is really clear, that none of the kingdom values come naturally to us.

We need to be emptied of ourselves, coming to God, trusting him to give us good, trusting that he gives us mercy. Our God, who he is, is true mercy.

He is full of truth and grace. We need to receive the heart of God if we are to be truly merciful. And so, we're told, ask.

[22 : 43] And this heart of God, being like God, knowing you, growing to be like him, will be given to you. Seek and you will find true treasure. Knock and the kingdom of heaven will be opened to you.

If you seek what's important to God, what's actually good, the Father is excited, wanting to give you life. All the storehouses of heaven, the armies of heaven will be opened up to you.

Ask and you'll receive. True mercy is who our Father is. And that mercy is meant to run in the family. Each of us have entered the family by the same blood of Jesus.

So, as brothers and sisters, we are called to show this same mercy that we have received. We see this summed up in verse 12.

So, whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them. For this is the law and the prophets. Now, this is a summary of all Jesus' teaching.

[23 : 52] If you want to know what God's law is about, it's quite simple, love. But I think in particular, Jesus is contrasting this attitude with being judgmental, laying down God's law without grace.

Because which one of us doesn't want to receive mercy? And if we want to receive mercy, then we should give our brothers and sisters mercy.

this question, what would I want if I was that person? It's a really simple question, but it's a profound one.

It's quite a loving teaching from our Lord because life is complex. We want to bring all the scripture to bear, but sometimes we just don't know what to do.

Asking this question, it can really help us. How would I want to receive mercy? Now, this isn't placing myself as the standard of what to give.

[24 : 53] It's not like when buying someone a birthday present and you buy them what you would want rather than what they would actually want. A true love is to understand a person as much as he can, to be in their shoes and ask, how would I want God's forgiveness, God's help, God's instruction to be applied to me in this situation?

If I was stubborn and hardened in my sinful thinking, although it would anger me at the time, in hindsight, I would want my brother to clearly show me the destructive consequences of the part of me and I want my brother to then help me see my father's better way.

Or if I was trying to please the Lord and I was just failing in how I was carrying it out, I would want my intentions to be affirmed that then receive encouragement and advice to change course.

How would I want the grace and help of God applied to me? Show mercy as you want to receive mercy. But then there's those who are outside the family of God.

There are some who absolutely refuse mercy and I think that's what verse 6 is about. Do not give dogs what is holy.

[26 : 18] Do not throw your pearls before pigs lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you. Dogs and pigs are in Jewish thinking they're unclean animals.

They don't belong in the holy presence of God's community. So don't think of a dog like a Labrador as a pet in your home. Think of a wild dog that you want to stay in your car to hide from.

The Jews of Jesus' day would have thought of Gentiles as dogs outside the kingdom especially the Romans, Samaritan mongrels and any Jews who are unclean morally, religiously.

And yet what do we find in chapter eight? Who is it that enters the kingdom of heaven? We're going to come to it soon but we first see an unclean leper, Jesus touching him and cleansing him, welcoming him in and then a dirty Roman soldier comes into the kingdom.

Jesus is redefining who is considered dogs outside the kingdom. Who is it that after hearing this sermon by Jesus will be so offended by his grace that they will want to destroy him?

[27 : 43] It's the self righteous religious people, the Pharisees and scribes. Chapter 23, Jesus says to them, woe to you, hypocrites.

In other words, you are going to hell, woe to you. You outwardly appear righteous to others but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. And then after saying this, Jesus is in tears weeping over Jerusalem how I've longed to gather you as chicks under my wings, but you were not willing.

This judgment we're told to give. Notice that we're told not to give what is holy. don't give pearls.

There's some who stubbornly refuse to receive God's mercy, mocking Jesus' blood even to the point of attacking you. If they refuse God's mercy, you've got no other good to give them.

For some, I know we're meant to take risks. We might be hurt in response, but we need discernment as well. There comes a point where we need to leave someone in the state they're in if they won't receive mercy, but we do it with tears.

[29 : 08] So true mercy, it's not judgmental. True mercy, it doesn't ignore sin, but God's true mercy is always both full of truth and full of love.

love. We often err to one side, but in the person of Jesus we see what true mercy looks like. I think of the woman who was caught in adultery, who was brought before Jesus.

His self-righteous adversaries tried to corner Jesus between the law of God that clearly taught that such a person deserved to be stoned to death and between his teaching of forgiveness which seemed like he was permitting sin, doing away with God's law.

They thought they had him cornered. He had to choose between the two, God's law, God's truth, or forgiveness and love. Jesus calmly answers, let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her and beginning with the oldest first, they all put down their rocks and walk away.

When they're all gone, with just a woman left with Jesus, she is standing before a sinless man, God himself, the judge.

[30 : 39] And what words does she hear from him? Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, sin no more.

True mercy is full of truth of God's standards and it's full of grace that come together in Jesus Christ. That woman was not condemned because Jesus took that condemnation himself.

This sinless judge took it upon himself and he sees my life and he sees your life and he says to us, I do not condemn you, but come to pursue my righteousness.

As children of God by mercy, we don't discard God's law as if Jesus died for nothing, but we look to our father's ways to give us life, while at the same time we are humbled by his great and costly sacrifice for us.

Only knowing his truth and love are we ready to be mercifully take the speck out of our brother's eye. True mercy is not judgmental, it doesn't ignore sin, but it's both full of truth and grace.

[32 : 06] There is only one way you and I will become more like our older brother Jesus and like our father. We're not naturally like this.

We need to ask, seek, and knock. Will you pray with me? Let's pray before our good father.

Lord, you have given us only good. We rightly stand before you as judge of all the earth. Lord, if you gave us what we deserved, none of us could stand, but instead you have poured out all of yourself to us.

You have brought us into your family. You have promised eternal life. You've already given us eternal life in knowing you, in knowing Jesus, being filled with your spirit, being united with one another.

Lord, please help us to see one another as brothers and sisters in the blood of Jesus. Help us to treat each other with the same mercy and truth that we want to receive.

[33 : 26] Lord, do this among us so that the world might see just the difference in your church, what true mercy looks like.

Lord, change us. Help us trust that you are our good father and help us to pass that mercy on to others. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.