

The Real Danger with Judging Others

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0:00] Well, I'm sure some of you or many of you would know of this show on SBS. It's called American Ninja Warrior. It's a physical, everyone knows, right?

Do I need to explain it? Well, it's a physical challenge show where contestants face one challenging obstacle after another, often getting harder and harder in a course that they have to complete in the shortest time as possible.

One of my favorites is this one, the cliffhanger. It's where you need to cross a wall, hang only onto the narrow edges by your fingertips.

Now, as you can see from that guy there, I think, the contestants that come into this show are just amazing, aren't they? Their upper body strength, their agility, and yet very few of them make it to the end of the course.

If you do, you actually get to travel to Japan where they tackle the ultimate course, which ends in a rope climb to the top of Mount Midoriyama.

[1:06] So I think I've got a picture of that, yep. So needless to say, I tried to Google to find out, but I think very few people have actually got to the end of this stage.

There might have been one or two. It's just impossible, isn't it? It's such a challenging obstacle course. Well, if you've been with us for the last few weeks, you, like me, may be feeling that we've been on a spiritual American ninja warrior.

It's like Jesus has been giving us one challenge, one challenging teaching, one challenge after another. Two weeks ago, we're called to rejoice.

Do you remember? Lead for joy even when facing persecutions for the name of Jesus. Last week, the challenge was to love our enemies, to pray for them, to bless them.

Even though, as I said, my instinct is always just to run away, to have nothing whatsoever to do with the person who hates me. Well, tonight, we find yet another challenging command.

[2:14] We find the command not to judge or condemn others, but to forgive and give. Now, the reality is we judge people all the time. In fact, I would argue that sometimes it's necessary in order for us to make the decision.

So, for instance, if you are changing jobs, let's say, and you have two offers on the table, then part of working out which one to take is to judge the people you'll be working with.

Which team will be friendlier? Which boss will be more supportive? You make these sort of judgments, don't you? Even though you don't know these people very well at all.

Similarly, Andrew and I, we often make judgments before appointing leaders in the church. So, Devin's gone out now, so... I'm going to say nice things.

But when Devin asked to be a student minister here, we had to form a judgment of him. Would he fit well with the staff team? Is he teachable?

[3:20] What are his gifts? What is he looking for? In terms of his training? We've had to make a judgment. And we do it for both his sake and for the sake of the church.

Because if we make the wrong call, it could be disastrous for him and for us. Now, thankfully, it's proved out to be a great judgment call. Not on our part so much as the quality of Devin as a person.

Now, Jesus himself says in our passage next week as well that we recognize or judge people by their fruit. And elsewhere, he says it explicitly in John 7 and verse 24.

Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly. So, there's obviously a place to judge rightly, to judge others. And so, when we read Jesus' command here, I think what he's talking about is a judgment of a different kind.

He's not just teaching us simply not to judge others, but actually not to be judgmental. That is, not judge people with a critical spirit.

[4 : 24] Not always finding fault with them in order to condemn them. Being judgmental often leads to condemnation, doesn't it? A dismissing of someone's character and a refusal to forgive what they've done to you.

And this often happens when we're angry or when we've been hurt by others. So, for example, we're upset because, you know, the band leader didn't pick us for the band.

Or they ignored us, not the band leader, but someone else ignored us when we've come to church. So, it seems. We're hurt by that. And when that happens, we then start to jump to conclusions.

We start to impute motives into their actions. Is it because he's being petty and, you know, getting back at me for sort of criticizing his leading, you know, two weeks ago?

You know, we start thinking up reasons and often not good as to why they're doing things to us. The reality, of course, is we can't read their minds. And there could be all sorts of innocent reasons for their actions.

[5 : 28] They may ignore you because they've had a lot on their mind. Maybe their family member is unwell. Well, Jesus commands us not to be judgmental, but to be forgiving and generous.

And the reason for this is, firstly, because when we judge others, we invite the same judgment on ourselves. We create a measure, as I say in my outline, for our own judgment.

For the measure we use against or towards others is the same measure that will be used against or towards us. And I think it works both ways. Judge, and you'll be judged.

Or conversely, forgive, and you'll be forgiven. Jesus says in verse 38, if you look with me, Jesus here is talking about a device that traders used to have to measure things they sell, like, you know, wheat or grain.

So if you buy grain, for instance, they'll scoop it in this measuring cup. And if he's generous, then what he'll do is that he'll keep shaking it to remove the air pockets and then press it down further before topping it up until the grain runs over and into the tunic that you might be sort of putting out in your lap, which you then tie up and you can take home.

[6 : 52] So one scoop, but could have multiple amounts. It's a bit like buying a scoop of ice cream. I don't know why you, sometimes when you go to the ice cream seller and he's generous, you know, he or she will, when he scoop, they'll pack down the ice cream so that you get a huge single scoop, right?

One that's sort of spilling, almost spilling over the corn. But if he or she is stingy, then you get a measly half scoop, don't you? You know, that kind of thing that sort of doesn't even sort of get past the edge of the corn.

Well, Jesus says that whatever measure you use, that's the measure which will be used for you. Be generous and the same generosity will be shown to you. Conversely, be judgmental and you'll suffer the same.

So it's like the law of reciprocity again, isn't it? From last week. Except this time, it's not justice that's being reciprocated. It's grace. The more grace you show others, the more will be shown in return.

Now, all the commentators that I've commented, as in Bible commentators, I've consulted. Take the view that it's God that's the one that's judging and forgiving.

[8 : 08] That is, Jesus is saying, don't judge or God will judge you. Forgive and God will forgive you. So even someone as eminent a scholar as Don Carson, you might not know him, but he's this New Testament scholar that everyone sort of looks to.

Even he thinks like that. But, having reflected on this and having read what's in the immediate context, I wonder whether, perhaps, Jesus is not really talking about God here, but he's actually referring to other people instead.

Why do I say that? Well, in the very verse before, Jesus has said that God's merciful. He doesn't judge us by what we deserve. He's kind even when we're ungrateful.

And so, for Jesus to then say straight after that, unless you're gracious, God wouldn't be gracious to you, strikes me as being a bit odd. After all, grace is giving someone what they don't deserve.

So, whilst I acknowledge that there are other verses in the Bible, like Matthew chapter 6 and verse 14, where Jesus does say that if we persist in being unforgiving, that God will not forgive us as well.

[9 : 23] I'm not sure that that's what Jesus is saying here. Jesus' focus here is on kingdom living, on how disciples are to treat one another. So, in the next verses, Jesus speaks of a teacher relating with a student.

And then in verse 41, it's a brother relating to another brother. And so, whereas the focus last week is to be gracious to those who hate us, this week the focus is on showing grace to one another.

How will those who follow Jesus treat each other so that they stand out from the world? And so, I'm going to sort of go out on a limb here and propose that what Jesus is saying is that both being judgmental and gracious are infectious.

That is, be forgiving and generous and it will rub off on others and create a culture of grace which will then result in you receiving that grace, that generosity, that forgiveness.

In the same way, if you are judgmental, then in time, those we treat like that will do the same for us. Measure for measure. Now, of course, the fact that we're able to be gracious at all is first and foremost because Jesus is himself gracious to us.

[10 : 39] He's the one who started it all. We are forgiven in Christ Jesus even when we're undeserving. And it's by looking at how Jesus is gracious that we too learn how to be gracious.

So, yes, grace starts with Jesus. But then afterwards, I think Jesus is talking about how grace to each other results in grace being shown in return.

Now, Jesus is not saying by these verses that there's an unclad guarantee here that as though if you are going to be forgiving, then immediately we're going to get forgiveness in return. That's not how it works, I don't think.

Instead, when we cultivate an attitude of grace, then the community we belong to will develop that culture over time and will be gracious too, including to us.

So, I say that then those of us who are leaders in this church or who are older Christians here, we need to recognize that there's a key role that we play here in regard to this matter.

[11:46] Our actions shape the church's culture. Likewise, parents do the same for families. So, if as leaders we're always critical of other people's mistakes and impatient with those we lead, or if those we lead never receive our forgiveness, then as a church, we begin to develop a judgmental culture.

Those we lead will start to think, hmm, is that what it takes to be a leader in this church? And then they'll take on that attitude. And then one day, we'll find the tables are turned on us.

They will start judging our very, every mistake, everything we say, everything we teach them. They will remember how we treated them and start to do the same.

On the other hand, if we're gracious and forgiving, then those we disciple will begin to be like that too. They will begin to be like Jesus.

Now, I don't know what kind of church you'd want, but I want to be part of a church that is gracious and forgiving. Which means, actually, I have to pray that God will make me like that too, first.

[12:59] Into someone who forgives when others hurt them, or who corrects gently and is generous in my encouragement. If that's the church I want, then it needs to start with me.

So that's the first danger with judging others. We create the same measure for our own judgment. So to avoid that, how we apply it is to cultivate grace instead.

Cultivate grace so that we'll receive grace instead. Now, the second danger, just moving along, with judging others is that it blinds us to our own faults and failures. Jesus explains this with a parable beginning in verse 39.

So he says, Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into a pit? The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher. Now, the point Jesus makes here is a familiar one, isn't it?

Students are only as good as their teachers. So a music teacher that only can play violin shouldn't try and teach the trumpet. Same with a history teacher who knows nothing about chemistry.

[14:06] Shouldn't try and teach that subject. But this is particularly true for grace and generosity. These are things that can only be learned through modeling, not just by verbal teaching.

If you as a teacher are always criticizing a student for being ungracious, there is no way a student will learn grace. There's no way that they will learn what forgiving looks like.

But I think Jesus here is speaking more than just to teachers. Because there's a sense in which anyone who judges or condemns is putting themselves in a position of superiority and therefore acting like a teacher to the one they judge.

I'm sure you've heard people say when they're being criticized, Look, if you think you're so smart, then stop criticizing and you do it yourself. I say it all the time. I get told off all the time.

But like that. What the person is saying is that the one who judges is trying to teach what is right. The one who judges thinks they know what is right.

[15:15] And so instead of criticizing, they should demonstrate it themselves. And that's true, isn't it? If we teach, there is a presumption that actually we can do it.

If we criticize, there is a presumption that we know what to do. But the trouble is, we're often good at judging others. And yet when it comes to ourselves, we often fail the very standard that we set for others, don't we?

So we expect people to be honest to us. And yet when we're put under the pressure, we're quick to fudge the truth, aren't we? We make excuses for ourselves.

For example, I'm quick to criticize impatient drivers when they cut in front of me or they shoot the yellow lights. And yet I'm always quick to excuse myself when I do the same. There's always a valid reason, isn't it?

You know, I'm running late for a very important appointment. My daughter is going to be sent to after-school care if I don't get there by 4 o'clock. But friends, please let's hear Jesus' challenge here.

[16:19] In verse 41, he says, The problem, of course, is that whenever we're focused on someone else's fault, it blinds us to our own faults.

And sometimes those are the exact same faults that we find in ourselves. Everyone else can see it, and yet we're blind to them ourselves. And again, this is a particular problem for us who are leaders or teachers or parents.

Somehow we convince ourselves that just because we're able to teach it, we must know it. And that knowing it in our heads is the same as being able to do it consistently, day in, day out.

That's not the case, is it? Often we can judge others, and yet when it comes to our own selves, we don't do the same, we don't live up to the same standards, do we?

And so Jesus' antidote to this, Jesus' cure to this, is to practice humble self-inspection. Or in Jesus' own words, to practice plank removal before speck removal.

[17:57] So in keeping with this application, here's what I'm going to do tonight. I'm going to share with you a little about the planks in my life, and then I'm going to leave you to work out how it applies to the specks in your life.

I'm not going to be doing any speck removal tonight. So here they are, my last point, the three planks in my life. First, I've been reflecting on my own hypocrisy.

We all hate it, don't we, when we're called a hypocrite. It's almost like the biggest insult today that you can give to someone. And people use it all the time to hurt one another.

Even for me, it just grates when I hear someone use it of me. It grates now when I say, I am a hypocrite. And yet, look at those verses again.

Can you see who is using this word? It's Jesus. And consider who he's actually speaking to. We may think it's actually the Pharisees, but no, I think he's speaking to those, as he says in verse 27, those who hear him.

[19:09] That is those who are submissive to his words. That is his disciples. He's speaking to us. It's his disciples that Jesus is calling a hypocrite in verse 42.

It's me. And yet, unlike everyone else, Jesus is not doing this to hurt us, to spite us. No, he's simply pointing out the truth about me because he loves me.

And so, much as it bruises my pride, I actually want to admit this. I want to own this. It actually does me good to confess that I'm a hypocrite. After all, what's the definition of a hypocrite?

Well, it's merely someone who judges others by a standard that he himself doesn't keep, right? That's what a hypocrite is. Do I do that? Well, not all the time, thankfully, but enough for me to be guilty of hypocrisy.

It's funny, isn't it? Because I have no problem calling myself a sinner. It's like a badge of honor sometimes. I say, I'm a sinner saved by grace.

[20:17] And yet, why is it that I find it so hard to admit to being a hypocrite? Like, I'm a hypocrite saved by grace. That somehow doesn't sit with me.

And yet, I am a hypocrite that is saved by grace. Why isn't it that I can't seem to own that? But I think it does me well to admit this, I think.

Because why I need to keep reminding myself that it's God's grace that saves me. That I can't even live up to the standards I set for others. Let alone God's perfect standard.

It helps me to realize that I really, really need Jesus. That it's His perfect life and not mine that saves me. Now, of course, to say that I'm guilty of hypocrisy doesn't then mean I revel and take pride in it.

No. Once I know that that's what's wrong with me, I need to resolve to change it, to tackle my hypocrisy. But, firstly, I've been reflecting that I am guilty of hypocrisy.

[21 : 23] I am a hypocrite. Which brings me to my second plank. I've been reflecting on how I react to people's criticisms. I've found that I'm still too defensive when people try to correct me.

Instead of trying to consider what they have to say, my initial response is to always find fault with how they've done it. It's like I've applied Jesus' words tonight like this. I've tried to identify the planks in their actions, in their eyes.

Sure, they may have a point to make about my faults, but they're pointing out my specs. What they're doing, well, those are planks in their eyes. Why don't they go and sort out their flaw before they come and criticize me?

But that's the wrong way to apply these verses, isn't it? When people criticize me, I need to first ask God to show me whether they are right. And of course, sometimes they may be wrong, but I mustn't assume that.

And I mustn't go looking for faults in their lives in how they've criticized me. and then try and think, oh, you know, is my fault bigger than theirs? Or who's the plank?

[22 : 31] Is it theirs or am I the plank? Because even if they are the ones that have the planks in their eyes, that's for God to deal with. I need to attend to my own faults first, don't I?

And then often, I find that the things that I'm most defensive about are the very things that I look to for my identity. So, for example, nowadays, because I'm a pastor, it's my understanding of the Bible.

That's the kind of criticism that rankles me most. Because the last thing I want to be known for is a pastor that is not faithful to God's Word. That's something I should care about.

Sure. You know, my prayer is that I never want to lead people astray. But then, why do I then not welcome this criticism?

Because the person may be trying to help me to become a better pastor. Well, it's because it's become a source of pride for me. It reveals my pride in my ability to teach the Bible.

[23 : 37] I've made that leap from wanting to be faithful to God's Word to think that I'm always faithful. And when I do, I fail to see that that's a plank in my life.

I fail to see that actually my pride is a bigger problem to God than my unintentional mistake in understanding God's Word or teaching it.

Can you see what I'm saying? I've become so obsessed with this spec, which is I didn't really teach the Bible or understand the Bible well enough, when I've ignored that what the bigger issue is, is my pride.

But let's consider the third and final plank in my life, and this applies especially as I'm a pastor and a leader. And that is, I need to realize that the real danger when I judge others is that I'm exposing myself to the temptation of pride.

Every time I judge or correct someone, and sometimes I need to do it because I'm a pastor, the constant danger is that it feeds my pride and ego. I say this as a given.

[24:44] That is, every time I do it, there is that danger there, even if I'm doing the right thing. And I need to keep reminding myself of it. Now, Jesus is saying that, he's not saying that we should never, we should just ignore the specks in other people's eyes.

No, Jesus does say that sin needs to be dealt with. But he says that we deal with it after we've dealt with the sin in our lives, in my life.

So when I correct my children, which God says I need to do for their own good, I also need to examine my own life. Do I practice the same things I scold them for?

Am I too harsh on them? And it's only when I do that kind of self-inspection that I realize that I too fall short of God's standards. And that's when I become more gracious in how I correct them.

And so I've used the opportunity not just to correct them, but actually to correct myself as well. Now I've used that example as apparent, but the same applies with leaders or pastors which I do at church.

[25:56] I've given you three planks, but I don't know where you've picked it up. There is a common thread, isn't there, in all three planks. Can you see it? It's pride. So the summation of the sermon tonight, the big idea is the real danger with judging others is pride.

It's often hidden, it's often insidious, and really the only way to deal with it is to come humbly back to God constantly, to kneel at the foot of the cross, and to develop a practice of self-inspection by spending time with God, by reading His Word, by praying.

And that's why I included that psalm today as our first reading, because it's especially handy, especially those two verses at the end. And what a good thing to have those verses in prayer mate or in our prayer journal.

Have we got that up there? Yes, we do. So I want to conclude by just praying that right now, as we ask God to guard us against pride and hypocrisy and being judgmental.

we want God to do this as He says in Psalm 139 for us. Let's pray. Search me, God, and know my heart.

[27:18] Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting. Amen.