

Week 7 – It’s Not My Place to Judge – Matthew 7:1

Scripture Reading: Matthew 7:1-6

Introduction

When I first began preaching on a regular basis, I feared that I might quickly run out of topics to expound and that I would all too soon find myself preaching the same passages over and over again

Then I found out that one of the toughest things about preaching is determining what *not* to say because a meaningful and effective sermon can only be about one thing so the preacher has to decide what they want to present and stick with it

Otherwise, you run the risk of saying so much that nothing is absorbed

That means that a great deal of what is learned in the study must be left on the cutting room floor as it were and saved for another opportunity to preach a different sermon on the same passage

And it wasn’t long before I realized that I might never get around to getting back to some of the good things that I would like to share from the passages that I preach – things that didn’t “fit” with the theme of the first sermon

That’s especially true when one typically preaches expository sermons through an entire book of the Bible and determines to preach the whole counsel of the Word of God

But today we’re going to be looking at a passage and a subject that some of you may well find familiar because I preached a sermon on Matthew 7:1 during our “Sometimes What You Know Just Ain’t So” series in May of 2020

It was the third sermon of that series and it was titled “Christians Should Not Judge”

In that sermon, we took a thorough look at what Jesus was actually forbidding when he said “Do not judge” and the necessity of making judgments along with some steps a Christ-follower must take in order to ensure they are making biblical judgments

I recommend you go to the church website at brickchurch.net and take a look at or a listen to that sermon as we will be taking on Matthew 7:1 from a different perspective this morning and not re-plowing the ground we covered last May

Today we are going to be focusing on the concept of truth, the Christ-follower’s relationship to truth, and the responsibilities that surround knowing the truth

You may well wonder why we would focus on truth when our subject is whether or not it’s the Christ-follower’s place to judge but it’s a simple fact that judging or making judgments becomes inevitable when confronted by the truth

Because holding a belief implies that those who hold a different belief are mistaken

Let’s consider an example that should help us understand that statement

Christians believe in an afterlife – that the soul goes to either spend eternity with God or an eternity apart from God

Buddhists reject that belief because they believe in reincarnation – that existence is an endless cycle of lives and deaths and rebirths

Those two beliefs can’t both be true at the same time – that would fall under the textbook definition of a contradiction

Both beliefs could be wrong, however, and that would be the belief of the atheist who believes that the oblivion of non-existence is all that awaits us after death

Whatever position one takes concerning the reality of what happens when we die – taking a position implies that the other positions are wrong and that requires making a judgment –

It’s impossible not to judge when evaluating competing truth claims

So let’s first consider the concept of truth or, actually, the question as to the existence of absolute truth

I. Does Absolute Truth Exist?

It wasn't so many years ago that mankind for the most part believed in the existence and the discoverability of absolute truth

Absolute truth being objective truth that is true for all people in all places at all times

That period of thought was known as modernism and the biggest fault with that worldview was that it expected truth to be discovered only through reason and the scientific method

Unfortunately, modernism also viewed religion as being filled with superstition and discounted it completely but at least it admitted that absolute truth existed even if we hadn't yet discovered it and wasn't afraid to say so

However, the contemporary notion is that reason has failed to make sense of the world and modernism doesn't have the tools to construct a system of truths that are universally applicable

We call this system of thought "postmodernism" and postmodern thought states that there is not truth at all if by truth we mean values that are applicable to all cultures, in all places, and at all times

Truth has therefore become personal rather than universal and truth has come to mean something more akin to one's personal opinion of reality

Therefore, postmodernism denies any independent, overarching standard of right and wrong or of truth and error substituting instead a sense of "fairness" and blaming charges of immorality on prejudice or bias

However, anthropologists have discovered that truth does exist – at least in every culture they have studied

Because they have collected a rather intriguing list of morals that are so universally accepted they have to point to truth that is innately understood

Moral beliefs like the prohibition of murder or inflicting bodily harm without justification

The prohibition against lying – at least in certain areas like the taking of oaths

The right to own property

Parental obligation to care for and train their children

Loyalty to one's social unit – such as their family, tribe, and country

Respect for the dead and disposal of human remains in some traditional and ritualistic fashion

The recognition of courage as a virtue and justice as an obligation

And the list goes on quite extensively from these brief examples

But here's the thing, while these morals are widespread it's not their universality that makes them true – rather, they are widespread because they have demonstrated themselves to be true

They are justified true beliefs because they are based in reality and they work because of their rightness

I'm sure you've all heard the story of the group of blind men who, upon touching some part of an elephant all come to a completely different concept of the elephant than his fellow blind men

And, of course, each of them is wrong because he possesses such limited information that he can't possibly understand the truth

Some who deny the existence of truth point to this story to illustrate that those who claim to know the truth only believe they are right because they don't see the big picture

But the heart of the Christ-follower's claim is that someone exists who isn't blind, who has complete knowledge, and who has inerrantly revealed some of that knowledge to mankind in his written Word, the Bible

It's been said that three things are required for someone to know a thing

First, we have a belief – which is an idea about reality

Second, our belief has to correspond to demonstrated reality – our belief must be true

Third, our belief has to have warrant – it must be justified

So knowledge becomes “justified true belief” and we can develop justified true beliefs through reason, observation, experience, introspection, or authority

For example, I am justified in believing that I am angry or happy or sad or whatever emotion through introspection – by looking inside myself

I'm justified in believing that the sun will set in the west tonight because the experience of my life has shown that to be the normal pattern

And when I have justified true beliefs, then I can rightly say that I *know* those things are true

Now, Christianity claims that the Bible accurately describes the world as it actually exists and we say that this truth is observable by anyone who is capable of understanding and who isn't so stubborn as to refuse to see it

And we can point to its proven record of reliability and the authority that it can rightfully claim because of it

So when Christ-followers say they know their faith which is founded on the Bible is true, they are saying they have a belief that corresponds to reality and is justified by reason, observation, experience, and so forth

And since the Bible's moral teachings are rooted in reality they won't change over time or as circumstances change or even because of our preferences making them universal truths

And when we possess the universal truth that God has revealed to us we have the means to rightly judge all other truth claims

Still, there are problems we face when it comes to stating the truth and the judgment it naturally infers so let's look at those next

II. Problems with Stating Truth

Tolerance is the currency of our present world and it seems the unforgivable sin is to say that what someone believes, says, or does is wrong

Claiming to possess absolute truth is offensive

Therefore, courtesy demands that anyone who claims to have the truth keep their thoughts to themselves

And everyone is expected to have the civility to keep quiet about their privately held convictions which are probably just disguised prejudices anyway

Let's face it, very few people are really eager to swim against the tide of popular opinion

No one really wants to be thought of as a judgmental jerk

But back in 2007, *Time* magazine publicized a poll that found that 87% of young non-churchgoers characterized evangelical Christians as “judgmental”

And in a 2017 poll conducted by Barna it was discovered that 29% of churchgoing Christians under 45 years of age strongly agreed with the statement “if your beliefs offend someone or hurt their feelings, it is wrong”

If we take that thought to its logical conclusion we would have to then say if people find biblical truth offensive we should stop proclaiming it – sadly, more and more Christians are coming to that conclusion

So it's no real surprise that Christians often try to avoid judging others by hiding behind one or more of three responses to avoid appearing judgmental and wrong

First, some begin to frame moral judgments as opinions rather than facts

But facts and opinions are quite different things; and we ought to know the difference

Claiming that Donald J Trump was elected president of the United States in 2016 is different than claiming that the only way to prepare a steak is medium-rare

Making the claim that moral statements can only be matters of opinion implies there is no absolute or overarching truth

Second, some try to avoid making valid judgments by saying that God himself doesn't judge, so we shouldn't either

Shockingly, Pope Francis took that path when he was asked about gay priests and replied, "Who am I to judge?"

And when he was asked about his comment later he said, "Mercy is real; it is the first attribute of God."

It appears he was referring to God's appearance to Moses in **Exodus 34:6** and said of himself,

"The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness"

It seems as if Pope Francis has a somewhat limited view of God because God doesn't have a multi-tasking problem and all of God's attributes are perfectly present at all times and they exist in perfect harmony

So, rather than deducing that a merciful God could never judge we should understand that God is a merciful judge and that we, as the bearers of God's image, should seek to do what is right with hearts of mercy

Third, some try to solve the judgement problem by implying that no one should make moral judgements until they are 100% perfect

Those who make this claim often point to John 8 and the account of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery where Jesus said in verse 7 [**John 8:7**] *"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."*

While it's true that we should always work on ourselves first and avoid making hypocritical judgements in areas where we are deficient, to say no one can judge unless they are completely pure is itself a judgment

And the solution to the dilemma posed in John 8:7 is found a little further along in **John 8:31-32** where Jesus says:

"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

And with that we come full circle to the fact that God's Word contains the truth we need about moral matters and when we rightly understand what we find in Scripture we will be able to make proper judgments

While we might prefer to keep quiet so as to hope to be thought well of by others, it's the responsibility of the Christ-follower to proclaim the truth

As the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth in **1Corinthians 15:58**

Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

We are to be fully prepared to take on the untruths of the world as we read in **Ephesians 4:11-14**

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

And look just a bit further down the page at verse 25 [**Ephesians 4:25**] which says:

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor...

And, finally, let's consider **Romans 10:14** which shows that God expects his children to spread the truth

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

It's our responsibility to speak truth in the midst of a world of lies and when the so-called "truths" of the world contradict the Word of God we shouldn't remain silent

Still, we know that proclaiming God's truth will irritate some folks and will likely get us labeled as judgmental

But there are methods and tactics we can use to minimize those responses

And, as it says in **2Timothy 2:15** we must

Do [our] best to present [ourselves] to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

So let's now take some time to consider six ways we can better communicate the truth and, hopefully, cause less upset

III. How to Communicate Truth

First, trust God by surrendering the outcome to him

Proclaiming the truth isn't about winning every argument

Believe it or not, you don't need to have your opponent agree with you in order for God to accomplish what he wants

Your role is to state the truth and explain how it is justified and reasonable then leave the rest to the Lord

It's perfectly okay to leave the door open by saying something like, "This is a big issue and taking it seriously means taking time to process. I want you to know I'm always ready to discuss the matter further."

The second thing we want to do is express humility

That doesn't mean that God's truth is up for debate – it doesn't mean being wishy-washy

But coming off as a know-it-all who is unwilling to engage in a true conversation won't win many hearts and minds

We see this concept in **2Timothy 2:24-25**

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth

And in **Matthew 10:16**, Jesus told his disciples he was sending them out as sheep in the midst of wolves and instructed them to be wise as serpents and innocent, or harmless, as doves

Remember, meekness isn't weakness it's strength under control

Third, we need to dialogue like Jesus

Most people don't like to be lectured – I don't and I expect you don't either

But often when we are seeking to refute an error we can come across as too dogmatic as we simply put the truth out there in a kind of "in-your-face" "take-it-or-leave-it" style and then we're surprised when people decide to leave it

But as you read through the gospel accounts you will notice how often Jesus communicated by telling simple stories that had a deeper meaning

In doing so he demonstrated a true understanding of his audience as he used common, every-day situations to illustrate what he wanted them to learn

And his style required his listeners to listen and observe, participate and answer questions, and to then take action or come to a conclusion

But he always seems to inspire good, two-way conversation as he walked his listeners to the truth they felt like they had discovered on their own

Jesus also asked a lot of questions and that's our fourth thing we want to do as we communicate truth – **ask thoughtful questions**

Good questions are priceless when it comes to sharing truth because they help us to understand the other person and to gather information as to what they believe and why so that we can tailor our conversation to their needs and interests

When we ask questions and attentively listen to the answers, we demonstrate a real interest in the person we are seeking to persuade

So ask questions that lead to understanding and clarification like

“What do you mean by _____?”

I always say that you need to be sure to define your terms if you want to be sure you’re even talking about the same thing – otherwise it’s easy to wind up talking past one another

So, for example, if someone says “That’s not true for me” you might ask “How do you define truth?”

You might also ask **“How do you know that?”** to see if you can get to the justification for the other person’s belief

For example, if someone says, “No one can ever really know the truth” you might ask, “How do you know that is a true statement?”

You can take the conversation deeper by asking something like, **“Can you help me understand?”** which allows you to go on the offensive without *being* offensive

For instance, if someone makes the claim that all Christians are judgmental hypocrites you could ask them to help you understand more about that

“How did you come to that conclusion?” is a great question for drilling down to the nature of their beliefs and what experiences or observations have led them to their beliefs

And a great question is always, **“Can I take some time to think about that?”**

Sometimes we need time to formulate a response once we understand where a person is coming from and you aren’t obligated to come up with snap answers

So, don’t be afraid to take some time to give a reasoned response

Fifth, and this goes along with asking good questions is we must actively listen

Nothing says “I’m interested” more than a question that honestly solicits further communication and thinking

Communication research shows that people aren’t typically persuaded because of how clever or convincing a presentation is but because they have been given the time and space to see the truth for themselves

And many people convince themselves by talking things out so take time to really listen and ask follow-up questions or restate points to continue the dialogue

Lastly, try to get to the heart of the matter

Find out what is below the surface of what people are saying

One really great tactic is to ask something like, “If I could prove to you beyond a shadow of a doubt that this is true, would you accept it?”

Oftentimes the answer will be a firm “NO” and the stating of the real objection to the truth being proposed

Conclusion

In **Acts 1:8**, Jesus told his disciples of his expectations for them when he said,

“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”

And that’s still in effect for followers of Jesus today so; clearly our role is to inject heaven’s view into our world

That means we will often be called upon to weigh, or judge, the beliefs others hold

And stating the truth as found in the Bible – God’s absolute truth – will sometimes result in us being called judgmental

That's probably unavoidable

But to do otherwise and simply say, "It's not my place to judge" will short-circuit vital conversations just when they're becoming meaningful

And if we do so humbly and with good questions and a willingness to listen and engage further in the honest attempt to show people the truth we know and the basis for it they may just see past our faults and focus on the truth

God's truth isn't up for debate

God's nature is revealed in the pages of the Bible and he means for mankind to know what is true and it's up to the church to partner with the Holy Spirit in showing the world that God is good and that we can know him and be reconciled to him and then live rightly in the world that he created

So the next time you're tempted to say, "It's not my place to judge" stop

Instead ask clarifying questions with genuine curiosity, listen with a heart to understand, and tell stories that point to the truth – don't just tell people what to believe – and allow God to work through you to begin to reveal the truth

Let's pray

Matthew 7:1-6 (page 812)

“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 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.

“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.”