

## Mike Portland: The Danger of Being Right

Jesus says, 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 a 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 and attack you.

This is God's word, let's pray. Father, as we come to your word this morning, God, we ask that you would speak. God, we ask that you would speak through what you have spoken.

God, we believe that you have a word for us this morning. We didn't come here for no reason, Lord. We came here to see you.

We came here to hear from you. We came here to be changed by you. And so Lord, we know that you are present in this place, and you inhabit the people, you inhabit the praises of your people.

God, you are here. And we ask now that you would move powerfully among us, Lord. And you would give us ears to hear and hearts to obey what the spirit wants to say to his church today.

It's in Jesus' name we pray, amen. Well, we've come to one of America's favorite verses. Judge not, lest you be judged.

It's one of America's favorite verses. It's also one of the most commonly misunderstood verses in the Bible. In fact, people who don't even know the Bible at all know this passage.

Judge not, lest you be judged. What did Jesus mean when he said that? I just want to say right up at the beginning that Jesus is not advocating for some sort of mushy, undefined morality. He's not eliminating the reality of right and wrong.

And he's not advocating for suspending all discernment. In fact, at the end of our passage today, he calls people dogs and pigs. And later on in the Sermon on the Mount, he's going to warn us about false prophets.

And so Jesus is obviously not advocating for suspending discernment altogether. What Jesus is doing is Jesus is addressing something deep in the heart. When Jesus says, judge not, lest you be judged, he is addressing a harsh, fault-finding, critical spirit that can emerge in our hearts as followers of Jesus.

Remember the context that Jesus has been calling us to radically commit to his way of life through the Sermon on the Mount. He's been giving us truth after truth and calling us to follow

him and obey him radically. And one of the dangers for followers of Jesus who take Jesus's teaching seriously is the subtlety of spiritual pride.

We can become very skilled at evaluating other people while being very weak at seeing ourselves clearly. We can quickly identify what is off in other people. We can spot what needs correcting.

We can identify the flaw, the inconsistency, the weakness. But Jesus says there is a way of seeing that is actually blindness. And so our passage this morning is not only a correction, it is an invitation.

Out of harshness and into mercy. Out of blindness and into sight. Out of pride and into wholeness.

And I just wanna say to us this morning before we get into it, we need to let this text do its work in our heart. Because the easiest thing this morning would be to hear a sermon on judgment and immediately think of someone that needs to hear it. But Jesus wants to deal with us first.

In this passage, Jesus wants to expose our hearts, humble us by grace, and teach us to love others with mercy and wisdom. And he does that in three ways. First, Jesus exposes the pride behind our judgment.

Again, Jesus is not forbidding discernment here. He is exposing the pride that often hides inside of our discernment. He is concerned, not that we make evaluations, but with the heart behind those evaluations.

And he begins by exposing how spiritual pride first shows up in the way that we relate to other people. First, he points out a critical heart. A critical heart.

Notice what Jesus says. Why do you see the speck in your brother's eye? And think of a tiny little grain of sawdust. Like someone's cutting wood with a skill saw, sawdust is flying everywhere, and a little tiny speck of sawdust is stuck in their eye.

It's something small. And Jesus is saying that there are some of us who point out even the smallest problems. We have a fault-finding mentality toward other people.

We're overly harsh. I wonder if that resonates with any of us. For some of us, this comes very naturally to us.

We just instinctively view people through a lens of critique. We get excited when we get home from a restaurant after a subpar meal to leave a negative review on Yelp. Or maybe when we hear a faithful but mediocre sermon.

Instead of just being nourished by what was true in that sermon, our mind immediately goes to what should have been said differently. When we meet another Christian, we instinctively stand for weaknesses, inconsistencies, or failure instead of noticing evidences of grace. See, one of

the dangers for those of us who take the Christian life seriously is that we can begin to conflate the ability to spot flaws with spiritual maturity.

We can be right in our observation and yet deeply wrong in our heart posture. We can spot things that are real but handle it in a graceless way. Now, I wanna say something carefully here.

For some of us, underneath that critical heart, there is actually a deep longing for goodness. And that longing in itself is good. There's a longing for what is wrong to be made right again.

A longing for what has been broken to be healed. A longing for what has been twisted to be restored. A longing for something of the goodness of Eden.

And that longing is real. But somewhere along the way, that longing for goodness can become disordered. Often, beneath a critical spirit is not just pride, there's pain.

Maybe some of us have learned that in order to be loved and accepted and seen, we have to be good and perfect and always doing the right thing. We've learned that when we are out of bounds, we cease to be loved. And then that becomes the filter through which we view the world.

We become overly harsh on ourselves and then overly harsh on other people. We receive judgment in our own hearts and so we cast judgment on others. And it creates an inordinate attention on what is wrong.

And the result is an inner critic and resentment. Why don't you care about this as much as I do? Why aren't you taking this more seriously? What is wrong with you? You guys know what I'm talking about? And it begins to shape the way that we think and the way that we speak and the way that we relate to other people. And for some of you, I know that is real.

I know that you feel that. And I just wanna tell you this morning that that inner judge, that inner critic that you carry around with you can be healed by Jesus. He can get into your life right now and heal that inner critic.

So that what you hear internally is no longer, you're not good enough. You have to perform to be loved. You have to do better to be accepted.

But instead you hear the voice of the father saying, I love you. You do not have to perform for my love. It is a gift.

It's yours. But the critical heart, it doesn't stay hidden. Once pride begins to shape how I see errors, it also begins to shape the standards that I use on other people.

And that leads to the next distortion that Jesus exposes. And that is the unjust heart. The unjust heart.

Look again at verse two. He says, for with the judgment you pronounce, you will be judged. And

with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

When Jesus uses the language of measure, he's talking about scales, standards, the way that we weigh things. And Jesus is warning us that pride not only makes us harsh, it makes us unjust. It creates in us an unjust heart.

We begin to judge others in ways that we would never judge ourselves. We hold them to standards that we excuse ourselves from. We become severe with them, yet generous with ourselves.

We magnify their failures, but try to explain away our own. And Jesus is concerned that we do not use two different measures, one for others and one for ourselves. That is not justice.

That is hypocrisy. Making judgments on others that we would never ourselves be able to stand under. And this matters because Jesus is not concerned with performative justice.

He is concerned with hearts that are actually just. A person can care deeply about justice in public, and yet carry an unjust heart in private. We can speak loudly or on social media about equality and mercy and compassion, and yet use a hard and unyielding and merciless measure on the people closest to us in our lives.

And Jesus says, you need to be careful. That is what pride does. Remember earlier in the sermon, the Beatitudes, Jesus said, blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Don't pass over that blessedness because you refuse to soften your heart. But pride doesn't only show up in harshness or injustice. Sometimes it hardens into something colder.

It becomes cynicism. Jesus warns us about a cynical heart. Now someone might say, all right, I see the danger in becoming critical.

I see the danger in being harsh. But what if I've just seen so much failure for so long that I don't expect much from anyone? That's the problem. Cynicism is one of the more respectable sins in the church because it sounds like wisdom.

It sounds seasoned. It sounds realistic. It sounds like maturity.

But often cynicism is simply unbelief masquerading as experience. It says, this person is never going to change. This situation is hopeless.

I've seen this before. I already know how this ends. There's no point in trying.

And that's a form of spiritual pride because cynicism assumes a knowledge that belongs only to God. It assumes a kind of omniscience. Cynicism acts as though we can see the whole story, as though we know the future, as though we have complete insight into a person's heart and into what grace might still do in their life, into how God can still intervene.

But we don't know any of those things. Only God sees all the way down. Only God knows the full story.

Only God knows what he intends to do in the human heart. And so when we become final in our judgments about people, we are stepping into a place that belongs to God alone. Listen, sometimes one of the holiest things that we can say as Christians is, I don't know.

I don't know the whole story. I don't know the wounds this person carries. I don't know what God may yet still do in their life.

I don't know how the spirit might still break in. Cynicism speaks as though it knows. Humility learns to say, I don't know everything.

And people are just more complex than our cynicism often allows. I've been married to my wife Misty for 24 years and I'm still learning things about her. I'm still learning things.

I'm still saying, I didn't, oh, I didn't know you. I didn't know you liked that. I didn't know you liked that food.

I didn't know you were interested in that thing. And this is surprising. And if that's true of someone that I've known for 25 years, that they can still surprise me, how much more true is that of everyone else? People are mysterious.

People are complex. You don't know what God is doing. We don't know what God can do.

And it's unloving for us to be so conclusive about people's stories. But we've just learned in this culture, in our world to be cynical. We're cynical about people.

We're cynical about churches. We're cynical about schools, about communities. Sometimes we're even cynical about God.

Cynicism forces us into two-dimensional realities and it makes us simplistic. It makes us uncreative. It shrinks our imagination for what grace can do.

And Jesus is not calling us to that. So beneath the critical heart, beneath the unjust heart, beneath the cynical heart, there's an even deeper problem. And that is that we do not see ourselves very clearly at all.

Jesus points to the blind heart. Look again at verse five. Jesus says, or how can you say to your brother, let me take the speck out of your eye, when there is a log in your own eye? You hypocrite.

First take the log out of your own eye. This is the blind heart. And Jesus gives us an illustration here that's almost absurd.

You can imagine it. A man with a log in his eye is trying to do delicate surgery on the eye of

somebody else. He's standing over that person trying to operate on the eye where there's a piece of wood sticking out of his face.

It's ridiculous. And it's supposed to be. Because that is what sin does to us.

It blinds us. Especially to ourselves. It minimizes our own faults and magnifies the faults of others.

We instinctively think my frustration is justified. My anger is understandable. My judgment is necessary.

And all the while, Jesus says, you do not even see what is in your own eye. Listen, Jesus is not saying ignore your brother's speck. He is saying first, deal honestly with your own soul.

That word in verse five is striping. You hypocrite. Why hypocrite? Because hypocrisy is not only saying one thing and doing another.

At a deeper level, it is living with a false self-understanding. It is presenting yourself as clear-eyed while remaining unexamined yourself. And this is why self-awareness is so hard and so important for Christians.

We do not often understand the harm that we cause people. We don't see ourselves clearly. We have blind spots.

We do not see how we use our power. We're unaware of how other people experience our presence, our attitudes, our words, our anger. And Jesus is saying, you need to wake up to who you are and how you cause pain in this world.

Sin not only distorts our view of others, it distorts our view of ourselves. What sin does, it makes it seem obvious to us that the sawdust in a person's eye is a far bigger deal than the log in our own. And we say, no, I understand.

I have a log. I'm managing my log. I'm dealing with it.

Your speck, your speck, that's, that's the real problem. That's how we act sometimes. That's how we think.

Dale Brunner said in his commentary to Matthew, we have eagle eyes for the faults of others and we are blind as bats to our own. They are never without fault and I am never without excuse. We are all log-eyed reformers trying to save speck-eyed sinners.

That is so painfully true. We are log-eyed reformers trying to save speck-eyed sinners. But Jesus wants to heal us of our blindness.

He wants to give us an honest assessment of our hearts. Is this connecting with any of you? Maybe you can see that there's a critical heart in you. Maybe you've been unjust.

Maybe you've been cynical. Maybe you've been blind. And Jesus wants to heal you.

Jesus wants you to come to him and ask him the hard questions. Why does this irritate me so much? Why am I so eager to speak instead of listening? Why do I feel superior here? What in me is being exposed? Listen, this kind of self-awareness, it's not morbid introspection. It's just honesty.

It's living open before God. It's inviting the Holy Spirit to search the hidden places of our heart. And the beautiful thing is, is that Jesus can heal that.

He doesn't want to shame us. He wants to free us. And so that raises the question.

If Jesus is not forbidding all judgment, just harsh, critical, unjust, blind judgment, then what kind of judgment is he calling us to? Jesus teaches us how to rightly engage with each other's brokenness. It's not that we should never say hard things. It's not that we should never confront or never have difficult conversations.

He's calling us to move toward one another, not with judgment, but with mercy and wisdom. Look again at verse five. Jesus does not say, take the log out of your own eye and forget about your brother.

He says, 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. And so there's still a place for helping your brother with his speck. And Jesus shows us two ways.

The first one is merciful accountability. Merciful accountability. Jesus says, then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

You see, merciful accountability is what happens when a humble sinner lovingly comes alongside another sinner for the sake of restoration. And the image that Jesus uses here matters. He's talking about speck and eye.

The eye is delicate. You don't jab at the eye. You move carefully and gently and humbly with the eye.

And that is how Christians are to deal with one another's sins. Not with blunt force. Not with public embarrassment or shame.

Not with the tone of judgment, but with tenderness. Some of us have only known accountability as punishment. We hear the word correction and immediately think shame.

But that's not how Jesus deals with us. And it's not how we should deal with each other. Merciful accountability says, I am not coming to crush you.

I'm coming to help you. A church without accountability becomes hollow. But a church without mercy becomes cruel.

And Jesus insists on both. The church is meant to be a community where people are not just loved enough to be told the truth, but also loved enough to be helped through it. Let me just say, if in your heart, you don't care enough about a person to actually help them in their sin, then you're probably not the right person to confront them on their sin.

I remember years ago, a friend asked me, he was struggling with pornography. And he asked me if I would pray for him. And so I prayed with him.

And I felt like the Lord was moving my heart to share something with him. I said, Hey, I think, I think the Lord is calling you to fast. When you fast, you're denying basic pleasures.

Just the pleasures of food. And as you learn to say no to these innocent pleasures, the same spirit that is helping you do that will also help you overcome your cynical desires. And so he prayed about it.

He called me back in a couple of days. He said, I've been thinking about what you said. I actually feel like the Lord is calling me to fast for seven days to do battle with my sin.

But then he said, will you do it with me? I was just trying to drop off some pearls of wisdom. Look, it's one thing to point out something. It's another thing entirely to go side by side into the battle with something.

To say, I know you're struggling. I know that you are hurting. I know that this is an issue for you.

And I'm right here with you. I'm going to pray with you. I'm going to fast with you.

I'm going to fight with you. I'm going to go the distance with you because you are my brother and I care about you. This takes humility.

But when you know how patient God has been with you, you become more patient with other people. You're willing to sit with them. You're willing to do the work.

When you know how much mercy you've received from Jesus, you stop demanding perfection from everyone around you. When you stood before the presence of the Lord, you're no longer eager to stand above your brother. You want to come alongside them and help them.

God's grace does this. God's grace changes the way that we see people. People who have been humbled by grace are usually the most patient and useful and gentle people, especially in helping others.

With their sin, this is merciful accountability. But being merciful doesn't mean being gullible and gentleness does not mean the absence of discerning. Which is why Jesus calls us also to wise discerning.

Look again at verse six. Jesus says, do not give dogs what is holy and do not throw your pearls

before pigs lest they trample them underfoot and turn and attack you. Those are strong words, dogs and pigs.

And I don't think Jesus is mainly trying to categorize people as much as he's using strong imagery to make a point. He's using imagery from the ceremonial wall and Deuteronomy to basically say, let's not call unholy things holy. There are evil things in this world that should not be called good.

Don't treat holy, don't treat what is holy as though it were common. Don't call unholy things holy. Don't lose moral clarity.

That's what Jesus is saying. Do you see the concern? Jesus is saying, don't have a critical heart but also don't become morally confused. Don't crush people with harshness but don't call evil good either.

And this is where many of us struggle because we're just often more shaped by culture than we are by Christ. We are often not formed by how Jesus makes judgments, not formed by what Jesus calls good and holy and true and beautiful. We're often more formed by the emotional drift of the world around us.

And the judgments of the world keep changing. They're always changing. What the world praises today will mock tomorrow.

What it condemns one season, it celebrates the next. And if you build your moral vision on the shifting winds of culture, you will be tossed to and fro. You will keep adjusting.

You will keep swerving. You will keep thinking, I don't wanna be on the wrong side of history. So you move with the moment.

And before long, you were no longer being disciplined by Jesus. You were being disciplined by the age. When we are shaped by the world instead of Christ, we become distorted.

We become overly critical in some places and morally indifferent in others. We crush people where Jesus would show mercy and we bless things that Jesus would never call good. How do we think about our money, about sexuality, about our identity, about our neighbor? You see, if we are not being formed in the way that we think about these things by the words of Jesus and the heart of Jesus, then we will be tossed to and fro by the spirit of the age.

And Jesus says that is not the path to holiness. So what is Jesus doing in verse six? He has told us to help a brother with a speck. And now he tells us there are also situations where what is holy is trampled and the one offering it is attacked.

Listen, there are evil people in this world. There are snakes and receivers and charlatans and wolves. There are some people who are tender and teachable and others who are hardened and hostile.

And Jesus says that we must learn the difference. That is discernment. The wisdom to know what kind of moment we're in, what kind of response is needed and how to actually act faithfully without becoming either harsh or foolish.

Discernment asks, is this person brokenhearted or hard hearted? Are they wrestling or rejecting the Holy Spirit? Those are different situations and love does not treat them as though they are the same. Some of us are just more naturally confrontational and we need to hear verse five. The goal is restoration.

Others of us are naturally avoidant and we need to hear verse six. That niceness is not the same as love. And Jesus will not let us hide in either instance.

And so how do these two things fit together? Merciful accountability means I'm willing to move toward a brother or sister in love when sin is obstructing their sight. Wise discernment means I do not treat every person every moment in every response the same way. See, merciful accountability keeps me from indifference.

Wise discernment keeps me from foolishness. And both are impossible without God's grace. Only a heart humbled by grace can hold truth and love together like this.

And that's what makes Christian community so beautiful. Not that we never say hard things and not that we say hard things carelessly either. But that we become the kind of people who can be trusted with other people's souls.

People who've dealt with our own laws. People who are gentle with specs. People who know when to persevere and when to step back.

And that raises the deepest question of all. Who can hold mercy and wisdom together like that? Who can confront pride and discern without cruelty? And the answer is not us. Not left to ourselves.

Which is why this text does not ultimately and finally leave us looking inward. We have to look to Christ. So how do we respond to all this? We have to look to Jesus as the righteous judge is the first thing.

We have to lift our eyes and remember that Jesus is the judge. We are not the judge. And that's a good thing.

We are not qualified to sit in that seat. We do not see clearly enough. We do not know enough.

We do not love purely enough. We do not judge impartially enough. We misread people.

We assign motives. We rush to conclusions. We do not understand what's going on all the time.

We speak with partial knowledge. But there is one who judges perfectly. He is the only righteous judge and his name is Jesus.

He sees clearly. He sees completely. He never misreads the heart.

He never speaks from insecurity. He never uses two scales. He never gets it wrong.

He's the righteous judge. And maybe one of the reasons that you're so exhausted, so irritated, so resentful, is that you've been carrying the burden of judgment that you were never meant to carry. You've been trying to be the judge.

And Jesus says that seat is taken. We are not the judge. We do not carry omniscience.

We do not hold the final verdict over anyone. Let Jesus be the judge. Grace said that one said, we are never more miserable than when we're trying to be God.

Yet never happier than when we just let God be God. Jesus is the righteous judge. And that means that you can release that burden.

Because our judge, Jesus, took the place of the judge for us. Here's the beautiful thing. The one in that seat is not only righteous, he is merciful.

The righteous judge is the one who went to the cross for us. At the cross, Jesus bore the judgment our pride deserves. In the Garden of Eden, we judged God.

He's holding our arms. In our lives, we judge each other. But on the cross, the only one with the right to judge absorbed judgment for us.

He took the log of our sin into his own body so that we might be declared righteous. And if Jesus was willing to bear the judgment for you, then you can know that his mercy is greater than your sin. And if we live by that mercy, how can we withhold mercy from other people? You cannot stay self-righteous at the foot of the cross.

The cross tells us the truth about ourselves, that we are far worse than we ever thought, yet far more loved than we ever imagined. And so we need to come to Jesus, to look to Jesus, to come into the light. When you see Jesus rightly as the true judge, as the merciful judge, the one who laid down his life in your place to make you clean and spotless and righteous, the only appropriate response is confession and repentance.

Confession is just simply agreeing with Jesus about what is in you. It's saying, Lord, you're right. There is more pride in me than I knew.

There is more harshness in me than I wanted to live in. There's more blindness in me than I could see on my own. And then repentance is then turning toward Christ and away from those things.

Ray Ortlund has a helpful definition of repentance. He says, repentance is undoing what we've done, dismantling our idolatries, honing up to our own foolish judgments and recanting our own ideas. Then we resemble the life that is pleasing to God.

We start to think more carefully about how to live. We get tough on ourselves and make long overdue hard decisions. We prize God alone as our great delight and reward.

That is real repentance. Listen, repentance doesn't lead to a smaller life. It leads to a healed life.

And repentance is always hard, but it's worth it. Repentance makes you honest before God and it opens you up to his grace. Grace means nothing if we can't first come to a place to realize how desperately we need it.

It brings you back into reality and in that reality of who you are and who Jesus is. That's where healing begins. And so don't run from repentance.

Run into it. Because on the other side of repentance is sight and tenderness and freedom. And that is the kind of people that Jesus wants to form us into.

People who are patient with other people because we know how much Jesus has forgiven us. People who are gentle because Jesus has been so gentle with us. People who've experienced the grace and mercy of Christ become safe places for struggling sinners.

And so I just plead for some of you this morning that when you hear this sermon, your response is hardness of heart. I'm fearful for you. Do not harden your heart.

I don't want your heart to be hard. I wanna lead you to Jesus in repentance. And so let me ask you, where have you been sitting in Christ's seat? Where have you been harsh with others instead of mercy? Where has cynicism made you final in your judgments about someone that God has not finished working? And what would repentance look like for you today? What do you need to bring into the light? Whatever that is, whatever the spirit is bringing up for you, I wanna encourage you this morning to bring those things to the feet of Jesus.

Bring those things to Him. Look to the cross, receive His mercy, and let Jesus make you whole. Let's pray.

Jesus, we confess this morning that there are many ways in which our hearts have become hardened, either hardened by things done by us or things done to us. We just have to admit this morning that there is a critical spirit in some of our hearts, an eagerness and a quickness to correct, to point out flaws instead of come alongside and help. God, we confess our blind spots.

We confess that we don't see ourselves very clearly. We don't see how people experience us. We don't see how we cause pain.

And so God, as your spirit is moving among us this morning, calling us into this better way not of naivete, Lord, but of merciful accountability and wise discernment. God, we recognize that we can't do any of this apart from you. And so we ask God that you would meet with us this morning by your spirit, that you would convict us of our sin and draw us to Jesus, that you would give us a new hope, a new joy, a new freedom, a new lightness in our experience of you

and our experience with one another.

And so Jesus, we ask that you would have your way and that we would respond in faith and trust and believe, God, that not only are you not finished working in the lives of other people, but you are not finished working in us either. And so do your work in us, we pray. In Jesus' name, amen.