

*Stories Jesus Told*  
***The Speck and the Log***  
Matthew 7: 1-5

**First Presbyterian Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**May 5, AD 2024  
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

---



One of the highlights of vacation last month was getting to see Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band in concert. Bruce and his 18-piece band rocked the arena for over three hours without a break. He's still the Boss. I went with Cary, one of my best friends from seminary days. Years ago, at a different life stage, Cary, another pastor and I used to gather annually at the beach for a guys' weekend. We listened to a lot of Bruce on roof decks under the stars. Today's passage about not judging reminds me of one of the late-night conversations we had.

We were in one of our perennial beach debates. Three ministers hashing out the issues of the day. Is Jesus the only way to salvation? Are the sexual standards of the Bible still applicable today? As the night wore on, Cary dropped out and went sort of quiet. The other friend and I continued the lively discussion. Being the conservative in the group, I was trying to argue based on the higher reference point of the Scriptures rather than just human intuition. Suddenly Cary's silent voice piped up, "Judge not, that you be not judged. Judge not, that you be not judged." Whatever I said after that, he just replied, "Judge not, that you be not judged." He was a parrot fixated on a phrase, "Judge not, that you be not judged." Finally, I said, "Dude, if you don't stop, I'm going to have to smack you. You're not helping." He answered me, "Judge not, that you be not judged." So I smacked him. We've had that kind of relationship and we're still friends.

"Don't judge me!" We hear that a lot. It means, "Who are you to say your belief or your lifestyle is better than mine? Judge not!" We get that. We are all highly resistant to being evaluated. We hate being dismissed as a person because of our views, or even because of our failures. We try to avoid judgment people.

But is Jesus actually prohibiting all judgment? All evaluations? All discernment? Jesus does not remove from our purview the discernment of people that is necessary to make good choices. In fact, his whole teaching on judgment is a judgment *on us*! Four verses later, he calls his audience hypocrites. Is that not a

judgment? Five verses later he commands us not to give to dogs what is sacred, nor throw our pearls before the swine. How are we to determine who's a swine before we throw our pearls unless we make a judgment?

In fact, in one sense, we could argue that Jesus was the most judgmental man that ever lived. His words, his actions, his very presence brought to light the innermost reality of the people before him. He never hesitated to throw people into complete crisis as they faced the horrible difference between who God is and how they are. He called the religious leaders a pack of snakes and white-washed tombs. Was he violating his own non-judging standard? Or was Jesus willing to be measured by the measure he used? Jesus was in a unique position, because he was not only man, but God come among us. As God, he has the right to judge us. We affirm every time we say the Apostle's Creed that Jesus will come again to judge both the living and the dead. He is, supremely, the Judge.

The idea, then, that this passage excuses any behavior from prohibition or even opinion by the church is simply false. It is a wrong reading of the text. We must exercise moral discernment. The church has a revealed body of truth that we must guard and advance. It is the very way of life, and health and peace for all people. By the Scriptures, we read the world and make judgments concerning what is right and wrong, what leads to death and what leads to life. Of course, the church judges. We would be unfaithful if we did not.

Ok, so if Jesus is not prohibiting all forms of judgment, what is he actually saying to us in this passage? Here's where things get a bit dicey for us. Jesus tells us that when we do use our ability to judge, we need to know that by the same terms that we render judgment, we will be held accountable. That slows me down in a hurry. And it scares me. "In the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." Ouch. The standards to which you hold others will be held to you. When I criticize, that flashlight I am shining on your behavior will be turned like a searchlight onto my life. The dim pin light I can shine in my limited knowledge will turn on me with laser precision. Can we stand such scrutiny?

With this warning hanging over us, we come to Jesus' famous parable about log removal. Jesus asks us, "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?" Now the first thing to notice here is that clearly, we have Scriptural evidence that Jesus wore contact lenses! Surely he thought of this parable because he knew how having a nearly microscopic speck on your lens can feel like you have a tree trunk in your eye.

This is especially the case for me on Sunday mornings. I remember the time when I was running late, but just couldn't cleanse my lens of the miniscule plank that was stabbing my eye. So, I just ripped it out and grabbed a new lens. Then, once I was irrevocably committed to barreling down the interstate, I realized I couldn't see clearly more than four feet in front of me. I had popped in the wrong lens and both my eyes were adjusted for near vision. I have no idea what the congregation at 7:45 looked like. Thankfully, Rhonda brought me the right lens by 9.

Of course, in this parable, Jesus was not talking about literal glasses. Rather, he was talking about a phenomenon that psychologists centuries later would call *projection*. Projection works like this. What I hate in myself, I don't like to see. So, to keep from finding these wretched qualities in me, I throw them out onto you. I project my junk onto you. I see in you what I don't want to see in me.

Biblical scholar Walter Wink has an exercise he uses when teaching on this passage. First, he has you do some fun work. He tells his class to make a list of all the things there are to criticize in a) a family member, b) a neighbor or coworker, and c) society at large. Now that's fun. I found that the words came flying from my pen. Oh yeah, "self-seeking, attention-craving, over-talkative, connives for own way, can't rise above the feelings of the moment, power-wielder, pleasure-oriented, obsessed with self." It took me about 25 seconds to scathe all three. Then Wink says, "Now put a check by every one of those qualities that's in you." That took another 25 seconds, but they were much more painful than the first. Yikes. Hypocrite, why do you see the speck in your brother's eye and not the log in your own?

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to build an airtight case against people when they are absent? You can work yourself into a self-righteous fit. As you look at the facts, they're all in your favor. She is all wrong. And I am completely right. Oh, boy, I've got him now. I've got him and I'm going to let him have it. Isn't it amazing how wise and discerning you become? You see others' motives so clearly. Only thinking of self. Never admitting fault. Wanting it all their way. Disregarding the truth so they can do what you want. Hardly Christian. Do these people really even know the Lord? Certainly not like I do. Oh, how does she live with herself? Why, I almost feel sorry for him. Almost, but I don't think I can stoop that low right now. It's just disgusting.

Have you ever noticed how different reality is once you actually have a conversation with the person? Once you finally see another side? Once you get

exposed for so miserably and completely misreading the situation? It's just embarrassing.

A good rule of thumb is that if you're sure the facts prove that you are completely right and the other person is completely wrong, then you don't have all the facts. This is particularly true when you are convinced you know someone's motives. How many times are people actively plotting evil against us in just the way we think they are? Not very often. How many times are they the scummy scoundrels they seem when I'm building my case against them? Not very often.

Hypocrite preacher! Go work on that chunk of a log that's blinding you before you get frothy over the specks in other people's eyes.

Now that ought to slow us down quite a bit. Doing the projection exercise is certainly humbling. Turning the light back on self instead of on someone else means a season of confession and repentance. It drives us to Jesus who alone is judge. To seek mercy for myself, and then to pray his mercy for you. Turning judgment on ourselves first slows us way down in our condemning of others. Exposing our own motives, seeing how they are driven by pain and need, opens us to empathy with others that can trump our self-righteous pronouncements.

But as we come full circle with this text, we know that this is not the end of it. When we do remove the plank from our eyes, then there may yet be a genuine call to deal with the specks in other's lives. But all our confronting is done now in humility, not arrogance. We speak to others quietly, not shouting. But still we do speak.

The beloved spiritual teacher, Henri Nouwen, used to speak of the *wounded healer*. From our own wounds comes the ability to bring healing to others. Who can speak to the backsliding alcoholic better than the one who has fought, not always successfully for sobriety for fifteen years? Who can talk sense into us better than the person who has known us for ages? We have enough dirt on each other that no pretension could ever be tolerated. But in humility, we've shared enough pain to touch hearts in ways few others can. Who can warn us where a road is leading—on the fast track in business, when dallying with someone who's not your spouse, when surfing the net or looking at a change in life—better than the one who has been down the road, and paid the price?

We simply have to speak the truth to each other. We have to make judgments. But two boundaries are always there. 1) We judge based on *God's*

*Word*, not our own opinions. We make our determination based on the standard that is above us, not created by us, or generated from our own opinion. We judge based on a standard to which we ourselves agree to bow the knee. And, very importantly, we judge from the Word based on behavior, not our assessment of someone's motive. We leave the assigning of motives to God.

2) We judge out of the *humility* of having first judged ourselves. Not once and for all time, but in a relentless scrutiny of self, a continuing habit of humility, a life of perpetual confession and repentance. We speak to each other out of our woundedness, not out of our pride. We speak the truth in love, to win over others, not drive them into the ground.

Jesus, the Judge of the living and the dead, turns his eye toward us. His gaze penetrates the innermost heart. He sees our sin and we know he sees it. If we do not run away in shame, we fall to our knees to ask for mercy. Beyond hope, we find that it comes. Jesus came as the Truth. He shines the light that exposes all darkness. But he also came into the world to save sinners. We find that mercy comes with the call to follow and obey his Word, using it as the measure for all of life. We turn the Word first and always on ourselves. Then, and only, then, out of our brokenness, out of the mercy we have received, out of our gratitude to God, do we dare to speak to others as God leads. In this way, we live within this text, "Judge not, that you be not judged."