

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL AWARENESS (Matthew 7:1-12)

2.21.21

INTRODUCTION

Through this time that we have been focused on Christ's Sermon on the Mount, a theme has slowly been chiseling itself into my head: "Shining on earth by being plugged into heaven" or, to put it another way, "While our feet may be planted on earth, our mindsets need to be anchored in heaven." Either way the bottom line is the same: If we are to shine the light of Christ and the light of His gospel on the world around us, that can only happen when our citizenship - heart, body and soul - is totally found in heaven, meaning that all our words, thoughts, emotions and reactions reflect the ways of heaven, and not the ways of earth. Today's words from Jesus - the first 12 verses of Matthew 7 - are a very practical, relevant look at what being "anchored in heaven" looks like while we're living out our lives here on earth. But before we begin, **let's start with a word of prayer.**

TEXT AND ANALYSIS (Matthew 7:1-12)

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 7:1-2.

The idea of judging here is to literally set yourself up as a judge. Interestingly, one of the indicated meanings the Greek word implies is to separate, as in separating the "good" from the "not so good" - in the opinion of the judge. Christ is stating this as a command (the imperative tense). And, as He would later say, ***"Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 24:35***, this would be, as we would say in the military, a "standing order," meaning that such an order would always be in place. While we are certainly called to judge in matters of sin, we are never called to judge "people." For, as Christ says, however we measure our judgments, in other words, the standards we employ for judging others, that will be in turn the measure by which we will be judged. Christ's words in Luke's gospel amplify this message: ***"Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven" - Jesus Christ, Luke 6:37b.***

And then He goes on to a silly but totally appropriate example: ***"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye to pieces" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 7:3-6.***

The Greek word here translates as "mote," an Elizabethan word from the early 17th century that meant something small blown about by the wind - a tiny bit of straw, a tiny twig, or a piece of wool - something relatively inconsequential. That's what Christ is talking about here - literally, some tiny little speck of dirt in the eye. Christ asks how can we get all consumed with fixing our brother's speck in his eye when there is literally a "beam" (think 2x4) in our own eye. The original Greek referred to a major piece of lumber used to support a roof.

It's a wonderful piece of hyperbole that paints a wonderfully vivid picture: Who are we to point out the very small flaw in our brother when we are literally walking around with a lumberyard's worth of flaw in ourselves. His very practical point? Take care of your own flaws first. Only then are you - maybe - even close to qualified to turn to your brother's flaw. The hypocrisy, of course, is the judgment that suggests anybody else's flaws are somehow worse than yours - totally

focused in the flaws in others while totally ignoring the flaws in ourselves. Especially in light of how God views us, we might want to reconsider that position.

Next Christ gives us what seems on the surface to be a somewhat odd saying, but it maintains His train of thought regarding judging: ***"Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces"*** - ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 7:6***. What is basically being said here is the first rule for most stand-up comics: "Know your audience." No faithful priest would have taken an altar offering and thrown it to wild dogs, and only an idiot would throw pearls into a pigpen full of swine. In this case, Christ is calling for mature discernment as we encounter the people around us. What are their motives for inquiring about the gospel? If the reaction to a witness is a mocking rejection, godly discernment may instruct us to move on. Jesus remained silent for a good chunk of time during His trial; Paul stopped interacting with Jews who resisted and rejected his message, ultimately turning his ministry focus to the Gentiles. God may direct the presentation of His precious word to a more favorable audience - and that is OK. After all, as Christ pointed out: ***"[T]he one who rejects you rejects Me, and the one who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me"*** - ***Jesus Christ, Luke 10:16b***.

And then Jesus moves on to another topic - prayer - and He does so with some of the most recognized words in Scripture: ***"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened - Jesus Christ, Matthew 7:7-8***. These are also two of the most exciting verses in all of Scripture, for they contain some incredible promises regarding our praying to God. First of all, we are promised that, as we ask, we shall be given, as we seek, we shall find and, as we knock, God's "door" shall be opened to us. God promises to respond to us.

Now Jesus has already laid the foundation for how we are to pray - not just the model but also the attitude; He's done it twice with the following verses:

1. ***"[Y]our kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"*** - ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 6:10***. We are to pray with the anxious desire that, before anything else, our requests line up with God's will. Christ's apostle John said as much toward the end of his first letter: ***This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us - I John 5:14***.
2. ***"[S]eek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well"*** - ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 6:33***. Our requests to God must come from hearts already in relationship with Him, having surrendered everything to Him. Relationship will always have God's priority over request.

And then there is some more promise: Everyone who asks of God will receive an answer. Everyone who seeks God will find Him. Christ's audience that day may have remembered the promise from their own scriptures, specifically from the prophet Jeremiah: ***"You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart. I will be found by you"*** - ***God speaking, Jeremiah 29:13-14a***. And God's door is always open to everyone who knocks on His door, seeking entrance.

Notice that these promises are extended to "everyone." The point Christ is making is completely wondrous: Jesus is telling us that God's promised responsiveness is not based on the goodness of the one who prays, but rather it is based on the goodness of God Himself. God's unchangeable

goodness, mercy, love, and grace is the rock upon which we can anchor our trust in the promise of His answers. And He is perpetually ready to respond to everybody who asks, seeks, and knocks from a heart devoted to Him and His will.

And then Christ puts this moment of thinking about God's goodness in a very personal way: **"Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?"** The way Jesus is asking these seemingly silly questions is to bring His audience as one to the very obvious answer: "Of course not; I would never even think to do such a thing." And then He completes the point: **"If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 7:9-11.** No one listening to Jesus that day would have dared presume that anything about them even approached the level of God - His holiness, His purity, His righteousness. So, Jesus closes this section with a similarly obvious point: If you all have an idea of what is good and appropriate to give your kids, whom you undoubtedly love with all your hearts, how much more will God, who loves you beyond your imagination, both know and give the absolute best gifts to those who come to Him with their requests.

And then Christ closes this section with what has come to be known as the "Golden Rule": **"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 7:12.** A lot of times, this verse is cut off on the front end so that it simply starts with, "Do to others." But that sadly misses out on the all-encompassing nature that Christ means his followers to pursue: two simple words - "In everything." In other words, there is no area of your life where you shouldn't do for others as you'd want them to do for you. And, according to Jesus, speaking to a people still beholden to the Law, these are words that completely reflect the purpose of the Law and the Prophets. And later, when He will identify the "second greatest commandment" - **"love your neighbor as yourself"** - **God speaking, Leviticus 19:18b** - this will not contradict but rather expand the Golden Rule from simply doing to others what you'd want done to you to actually loving everybody around you - proactively working for the best for everybody, regardless of what's coming back to you.

His audience would have brought to mind many scriptural references to this idea. From Proverbs alone would have come these words:

1. **Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when they stumble, do not let your heart rejoice - Proverbs 24:17.**
2. **If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink - Solomon, Proverbs 25:21,** words so profoundly inspiring that the apostle Paul quoted them in chapter 12 of his letter to the Christians at Rome, bracketing them with the words **Do not repay anyone evil for evil - Paul, Romans 12:17a,** and with these closing words: **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good - Paul, Romans 12:21.**

And of course, Christ had just moments before given His teaching on this perspective: **"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy"** - **Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:7.** The point, as always, was to treat others, come alongside others, love others, as God has done time after time after time - with us. In other words, how are we going to respond to how God has responded to us?

APPLICATION

These two subjects - judging others and prayer - have a great something in common: They are practical outcomes of having our mindsets anchored in heaven. But even more than that, they

both reflect our need of recognition of God's sovereignty, in other words, His mastery and His rule.

Let's look at the second one first - prayer. Prayer is the ultimate recognition of God's sovereignty - when prayer signals our awareness of some critical hallmarks to a growing Christian faith:

1. Prayer reveals our complete need for God: ***[A]part from me you can do nothing" - Jesus Christ, John 15:5b.*** We pray from a standpoint of helplessness; in fact, by falling on our knees before Almighty God, we are embracing the helplessness - which is exactly where God wants us to be.
2. Prayer underscores God's sovereign relationship with us through Jesus Christ. As a recently healed blind man told the Pharisees: ***"God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does His will" - John 9:31.*** We only become that "godly person who does God's will" when the life of God's Son is found in us.
3. Prayer reveals the inerrancy of God's will: ***[T]he Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God - Paul, Romans 8:26-27.***
4. Prayer reveals God's sovereign direction for us: ***God will tell us where we should go and what we should do - Jeremiah 42:3.***

BOTTOM LINE: Prayer is all about surrendering to God's sovereignty in any and every moment, in any and every issue, in any and every day. Thy will be done!

And then - judging others. Some 700 years before Christ was on the earth giving this Sermon, the prophet Isaiah predicted this about Him: ***[H]e will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what He sees with His eyes or decide by what He hears with His ears; but with righteousness He will judge the needy, with justice He will give decisions for the poor of the earth - Isaiah 11:3-4a.*** And that prophecy was fulfilled quite simply by how Jesus lived His life. He summed up His life in these words to Nicodemus: ***For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.*** Those words many of us are very familiar with, but it's the words that follow that are just as important: ***For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him - Jesus Christ, John 3:16-17.*** Think about that: Jesus Christ, as God's Son, had every right to judge the world. He could do that - He was Himself almighty and perfect God. Yet He gave up that right, following God's gracious and merciful plan of salvation instead of grabbing a right that absolutely was His to claim.

And what did that look like? Remember the woman brought before Christ by the religious leaders in John 8? She had been caught in the very act of adultery - a clearly sinful act that came with some very clearly worded scriptural consequences. So, what was Christ's response to all those hollering for her head? ***"Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her"- Jesus Christ, John 8:7b.*** In other words, go ahead; take her and do what you want. Just one thing though: The one of you without sin, you start the stoning. It's what the apostle James said: ***There is only one Lawgiver and Judge - James 4:12a*** - and to paraphrase what Christ was telling that group of wannabe judges, jurists and executioners, "you ain't it!" And what happened? The crowd disappeared - disarmed by the fact that they knew they had no claim to perfection.

Now what was His point? That she really hadn't sinned? No, not at all. In fact, His parting words

to her were: ***"[G]o and sin no more" - Jesus Christ, John 8:11b (NKJV)***. His point to her accusers (and to us) is that none of us are perfect; we all have our sins - some of them "specks in our eye," some of them are flat-out logs - and most probably a generous helping of both. The apostle James illustrated the complete impossibility of our ever-finding perfection in our lives: ***[W]hoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it - James 2:10***. If that is us, who are we to judge?

Instead, we are to cling to these words of Christ, given to His disciples shortly before His arrest in Gethsemane: ***"I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" - Jesus Christ, John 13:15***.

And most importantly, what did Jesus do for us? In a word, reconciliation. And what is that? Reconciliation is simply bringing two separated sides back together again. We'll often see in divorce announcements that so-and-so are divorcing due to "irreconcilable differences." In other words, they are declaring the impossibility of their ever coming back together; their differences, in their view, are insurmountable - and therefore the end of the story. That was our position with God, according to Isaiah, as he wrote to the nation of Israel: ***[Y]our iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear - Isaiah 59:2***. In other words, between mankind and God, our "iniquities" had created irreconcilable differences.

But, praise God, He was not willing to let that be the end of the story. He sent His Son Jesus Christ to change all that; Paul sums it up like this: ***[R]emember that ... you were separate from Christ, ... without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ - Paul, Ephesians 2:12-13***. And as a result, as Paul shared with the Colossian church: ***[N]ow He has reconciled you [you have been brought near] by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation - Paul, Colossians 1:22***. For the Christian, reconciliation is everything!

Which is why reconciliation is so important for Christians to practice - one with another. It is foundational to all we claim. What kind of witness is it to the world when we proclaim the reconciliation offered through Jesus Christ, to reconcile us with God, and then we can't even reconcile with other people - or with each other?

That's why judging others is such a terrible choice for any Christian to make. Christ showed us by His life that our mission is not to separate from people but to come alongside them to proclaim in both word and deed the salvation story of the gospel. That's exactly what He did in leaving the glories of heaven for the dumpster fire of earth. But judging does just the opposite: We no longer come alongside but rather separate ourselves from people by our judgments. And worst of all, it separates us from the mission to which God has entrusted us; as Paul said it so well: ***God . . . reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them [those "iniquities" that kept us separated from Him]. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us - Paul, II Corinthians 5:18-20a***. So, judging others is directly opposed to what God is intending to do through the ministry of the church. And it is all the more horrific when that is how we treat one another.

CONCLUSION

It's taken me quite a while to be able to verbalize clearly enough what is at stake when we judge others, but God has patiently led me to His understanding. Judging others is an insult to what God is trying to do with us as a body of believers. Judging others is contrary right down to the bone to reconciliation. Judging others is a vulgar contradiction to how God wants the world to see Him, and to all that He is offering them. God's desire to reconcile with me, despite my sinfulness, is the most amazing thing I have ever experienced. In His sovereignty, He chose me to receive Him through His Son. He chose to come alongside me for the purposes of His kingdom. If God was willing to trade His Son's life for mine, how can I not be about the business of presenting that same story to everyone I meet?

And in so doing, I realize one of the greatest lessons I have ever needed to learn: I ain't any better than anybody. The only, and I do mean the only, difference between me and any other sinner in the world has nothing to do with me, but everything to do with the Savior who by dying for me reconciled me with His Father, and the Spirit that continues to mold me and make me and hold me up to the world as Exhibit A of what reconciliation between a sinner by means an incredibly saving Son and a lovingly Sovereign Father can look like.

Folks, we are all going to be rubbing up against people or situations that frankly drive us nuts. Don't let that interrupt the wonders of God's reconciliation. Sinners sin - and so do saints - and sometimes those sins happen against us, from both of those. Don't let that interrupt the wonders of God's reconciliation, either. I have no hope unless God overwhelmed the irreconcilable differences of my life with His irrefutable love and His irrepressible grace. So, with all He has shown us, and all He has provided us, and all He has promised us, don't be a judge - go into the Father's business and be a reconciler. And don't be a Lone Ranger trying to do life on your own. Instead, be an asker, a seeker, and a knocker - all to be your Father's reconciling ambassador. Pray that God literally conquers you, destroying all that doesn't reflect His Son to replacing those things with everything that praises Him. Let's make God's mission of reconciliation ours. That's what we're here for. Let's pray!