



November 1, 2016

feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)

Dear Church Family,

In the first message of the series, A People of Judgment, my theme was that focusing more on judgment, not less, makes people more deeply aware of God's love and acceptance. This past Sunday, we looked at the accusation that Christians are judgmental. The negative characteristics associated with this accusation are intolerant, self-righteous, arrogant, narrow minded, close minded, rigid (black and white thinking), oppressive, and condemning. We certainly do not want to display those characteristics in the name of Christ. But do those things follow from being a people of judgment, testifying that there is right and wrong and there is one who can and will perfectly judge between them. Do we need to set aside our convictions about right and wrong and embrace being non-judgmental in order to avoid these negative characteristics?

It is really not possible or desirable to live without making judgments. And our world is full of examples where some who identify as open minded, tolerant and non-judgmental are the epitome of intolerance when it comes to people who they disagree with. And they can be just as self-righteous, arrogant, oppressive and condemning. Being non-judgmental is both a fiction and a façade when it comes to actual practice.

We looked at what Scripture has to say about being a people of judgment without being sinfully judgmental. Beginning with Luke 6, "*Judge not and you will not be judged.*" This is favorite verse for our judgment averse culture, but it needs to be understood in context. The previous context is about God's mercy. *But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.* When Jesus says not to judge, He is not saying that disciples must not identify people or their behavior as wrong or evil. He is saying that they are not allowed to condemn people. Just as God is currently showing kindness to the ungrateful and evil, they are to be merciful, forgiving the wrongs of others. To not judge is to not hold the evil of people against them. It clearly does not mean to not identify the evil. You can only forgive someone when they are wrong and there is wrong to forgive.

The sin of judging is condemnation, assigning people to a place of deserving rejection and punishment for their sin. It is not our place to do that and we are forbidden from treating them that way, regardless of how wrong or sinful they are. We are to show them mercy.

Note that disciples are called to much more than tolerance. True tolerance is not the absence of thinking others are wrong. Tolerance can only be practiced toward those who we think are wrong. But tolerance can be practiced while essentially ignoring others and leaving them alone. Love and kindness cannot be practiced that way. Mercy is much more than tolerance.

Notice how Jesus directs his disciples to a place where they will be able to show mercy, even to those who mistreat them. This is the key to how to make judgements without being sinfully judgmental. He directs them to consider themselves in light of the judgment of God. One way to put this is that he tells them to turn their judgmentalism on themselves. *You will not be judged. You will not be condemned.* How do you feel when you consider your own situation under the judgment of God? How do you measure up? Are you comfortable with facing condemnation for your sins and faults?

When a Christian considers their own standing before the judgment of God, what are they most aware of? If you answered "their sinfulness" you have provided the answer of someone without Christ. When we face the judgment of God with Christ, we are most aware of mercy. And the more we are aware of our sinfulness the more we are aware that we receive mercy. This is what gives us the ability to show mercy to others.

Jesus uses the same tactic in John 8 with the woman caught in adultery who is brought before him by the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus shares their judgment of her behavior, that it is wrong because he tells her at the end of the story *from now on sin no more*. But he opposed their judgement or condemnation of her as a person, a person who should be destroyed. He tells them to turn their judgment on themselves. "*Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.*" As sinners, you should be aware of how you have been shown mercy and should therefore show mercy to others.

Mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13). That is true for us, and will become true in how we treat others if we so *speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty*. (James 2:12). Because when we do this, we are aware of how much we need and receive the mercy of God. As a people of judgment we become a people of mercy.

The Pharisees are typically seen as being criticized by Jesus as too judgmental. But Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees is that they were not judgmental enough because they did not turn their judgment on themselves. In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14, the Pharisee needs to be like the tax collector who is very aware being under judgment for being a sinner. The danger of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees is that they had a false sense of being accepted by God instead of realizing that they were under judgment and in need of mercy just like the tax collector.

People who believe that God is non-judgmental will often cite Jesus' opposition to the Pharisees to make their case. But they actually have something in common with the Pharisees. Like the Pharisees, they do not believe that they are under God's judgment. They are not like the tax collector pleading for mercy in their sin. They are like the Pharisee, confident that God will accept them.

Also, it was crucially important that the scribes and Pharisees in John 8 were aware of their sin and their position of deserving judgment. If they were unaware of their own position of being sinners and deserving God's wrath, they would be throwing a stone. So, what happens to a society that has lost a sense of sin and God's righteous judgment? Will people become more or less merciful to their enemies, to those who disagree with them? Has our society's aversion to judgment led to more civility, more gracious and merciful treatment of one another?

Just like focusing more on judgment makes us more aware of God's love and acceptance, focusing more on judgment also makes us more merciful and gracious to those who oppose us. For next time, we will continue to look at how being a people of judgment equips us avoid the negative characteristics associated with being judgmental.

Pastorally Yours,
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