

“Seeing Clearly”

Introduction: During a season in which the church is facing challenges, both from within and from without, Fuller Seminary devoted last winter’s issue of its magazine to the topic, “Renewing the Church.” The various articles included in this issue sought to highlight not only where the church is struggling, but also the many ways God still desires to use the church to make all things new.

One of the articles that caught my attention was written by Scott Cormode, a professor at Fuller’s School of Mission and Theology. He writes:

God has already given us what we need to renew the church. The renewal of the church will come when we learn to embody God’s grace. The problem, of course, is that the church often stands for the opposite of grace. If you ask people who are not Christians to describe the Christian church in one word, the same word comes up again and again: “judgmental.” The renewal of the church will come when we become known for the welcoming grace of Jesus rather than the condemning judgment of the Pharisees. [*Grace In Daily Life: Gratitude, Generosity, And Hospitality*]

Cormode’s thoughts come directly out of the Sermon on the Mount which we continue to look at this morning. As Jesus outlines for his listeners what it looks like to live as salt and light in the world, we’ve entered that section of the sermon in which Jesus warns us about ways in which we can lose our saltiness, and cause the light he has given us to share to become hidden. We’ve considered the pursuit of wealth and then the weight of worry. Next up is Jesus’ concern about our temptation to condemn, to assume the role of God, to move from the position of citizen to that of King. It’s a way that is contrary to the humility, love, and reconciliation that is to characterize God’s kingdom, a way that does not embody God’s welcoming grace. [READ]

I. Judging vs. Judgmental

A. As we did last week, when we distinguished genuine concern from anxiety or worry, we need to begin by making another distinction, that between judging and judgmental. When Jesus says, “Do not judge,” he is not contradicting the fact that God intended there to be order in the world he created, nor is he saying that we shouldn’t take a stand against injustice, nor that Christians shouldn’t be lawyers or judges. Indeed, as followers of Jesus, we are to discern between right and wrong, between what is wise and what is foolish. We are to determine who might be acting like a wild dog or a pig (v. 6), and we’re called to distinguish between true and false prophets (v. 15). The problem comes when we slide over from making judgments to being judgmental, from being concerned about sin to being condemning of a sinner.

B. Often it is not only easier to condemn but it also makes us feel better! That seems to be the desire of the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable. How much better he felt about himself because of what he wasn’t – a robber, evildoer, adulterer, or tax collector.

Illustration: A woman by the name of Alianore Smith, who works for the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity, put out a reflection last week entitled “Confessions of a Cyclist” that caught my eye. She reveals that she is a cycling commuter who, on recent rides, has been reflecting on cycling

and the nature of sin. She's noticed that when she's riding her bicycle to work, every close call she has with an automobile is always the driver's fault. At the end of the day, she and her husband (who also rides his bike to work) often compare notes about drivers they've yelled at during their respective commutes. "The truth is," she admits, "when I'm a cyclist, I'm pretty much convinced that all drivers are idiots." "But," she continues, "I also drive an automobile in London and when I'm a driver, I'm pretty much convinced that all cyclists are idiots. Notice a pattern?" she asks. "In my own head, no matter what happens, any near-misses are *never* my fault. I'm very good at making excuses for my own sin and very quick to blame others [as] just irresponsible." She concludes: "What if we extended the same amount of grace to others as we extend to ourselves?"

Or, as Jesus puts it in the sermon, what measure of judgment do we want to be used upon ourselves?

C. As he goes on, Jesus in effect Jesus says, those most eager to tell others how wrong they are usually need to take a long look in the mirror! Perhaps thinking about his days as a carpenter, Jesus encourages his listeners to first deal with the plank in their own eye before pointing out the splinter they notice in their neighbor's eye as the plank is preventing them from seeing themselves clearly.

Illustration: King David is perhaps the most poignant biblical example. After his adultery with Bathsheba, David multiplied his wrongs by plotting the death of her husband. But the Lord sent a prophet named Nathan to help David see. Nathan used a parable about a rich man who had a large flock of sheep and cattle but stole a lamb from a poor man—the only lamb this poor man had—in order to feed a traveller who had come to the rich man's home. After hearing this story, David was enraged, declaring that the rich man deserved to die and should pay for the lamb he stole four times over. Then Nathan declared to David: "You are the man!" (2Sam. 12:1-7).

Having ignored his own sin and strongly pointed out the sin of another put David in the category of hypocrite, of having a plank in his own eye that he had been ignoring. Often the heart that responds to another's sin in condemnation has not understood the judgment it deserves, nor experienced the infinite grace and mercy that God offers. Conversely, the heart that has tasted the Lord's grace and mercy will always be restrained in its condemnation of others. It will not ignore a wrong, but it will desire to seek reconciliation and healing of the brokenness, the "speck," that exists.

Deal with your own stuff first, Jesus counsels, and then see where that leaves your heart as you observe the lives of others.

II. Discerning

A. Which brings us to a challenging and odd sounding, concluding point as Jesus talks about not giving what is sacred to dogs or pearls to pigs. And the point he's seeking to make is this: "Do not be judgmental, but, on the other hand, do not be indiscriminating." There is, in other words, a discernment that is called for as we share the good news of the kingdom of God. Such good news is sacred. It is represented by valuable pearls. Sometimes that news will be strongly and even violently rejected. The picture Jesus sketches is that of a man holding a bag of precious pearls, confronting a very hungry pack of dogs and pigs. As the animals glare hungrily at him, he spreads the pearls out on the ground. Thinking they are about to gulp some tasty bits of food, the animals pounce on the pearls. However, when they discover that the pearls are too hard to chew, and have no taste, they spit them out and turn on the man who tried to feed them!

B. Just as the pearls were unappreciated by the savage animals, but only enraged them and made them more dangerous, so can the riches of God's revelation be unappreciated and soundly rejected by some. So, judgment is necessary, discernment is needed, not to know when we should condemn someone, but when it's simply time to move on, to shake the dust off our feet, as Jesus put it to his apostles (Ma. 10:14) and spend our energy elsewhere. There comes a time it is inappropriate to keep on trying to feed pigs with pearls. When is this time? It's not always easy to tell. But certainly, it comes only after we have seen our own hearts clearly and then sought to extend mercy and grace to another.

May God give us grace to see ourselves more clearly, to experience his mercy more dearly, and to know how to respond to the brokenness of another more sincerely.