

**"Judging Between Toothpicks and 2 x 4's"
Matthew 7:1-12**

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In a *Peanuts* cartoon, Linus asks Lucy, "Why are you always so anxious to criticize me?" "I just think I have a knack for seeing other people's faults," replies Lucy. "And what about your own faults?" inquires Linus. "I have a knack for overlooking them," replies Lucy.

"Judge not that you be not judged!" This statement of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount may be the most misunderstood verse in the entire Bible. If there is one sin that American's won't tolerate any longer, it is intolerance. So we use this statement to judge on judgementalism. We likewise use this verse to avoid difficult moral dilemmas. "It's not for me to judge," we say, as we excuse ourselves from community concerns. Did Jesus really intend to encourage moral indifference with this comment? Is everything relevant?

What does it mean to be tolerant in our day? I found myself asking these questions as I pondered this passage from the Sermon on the Mount. Here's what I've come to believe Jesus meant by this teaching.

When it comes to making judgments, start with yourself. The most famous louse in the world was crawling up the dress of a prim and proper lady at church when Robert Burns happened to notice it. Do you remember what he said about it?

*O wad some power the gifte gie us,
to see ourselves as ithers see us.
It would from many blunder free us
and foolish notion.*

Maybe Jesus had something similar in mind when He said, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbors eye but ignore the log in your own eye?"

I entitled this sermon, *Judging Between Toothpicks and 2 x 4's*, but I have to confess that the contrast is not enough. In literal terms it is judging between a speck of sawdust and a floor joist. Are you beginning to get it? Jesus says, "If you're suffering from "plank eye," you're in no condition to do laser surgery on somebody's "speck." After all, errors in judgment begin with poor eyesight. We say it all the time—before you criticize or abuse, walk a mile in my shoes. Paul said we see through distorted mirrors. We see and know in bits and pieces.

Psychologists tell us we have a problem with projection. The things that bother us most in others are the very things that trouble us most in ourselves. The strongest opponents of abortion may be persons still dealing with their own untimely abortions. Preachers venting the most poisonous homophobia, are often struggling with their own sexual identity. Jesus said that is hypocritical.

A grocery store checkout clerk wrote a letter to Ann Landers criticizing people for using food stamps to buy expensive items like birthday cakes. Ms. Landers printed the letter. Later, she printed this reply: "I am the woman who bought the \$17.00 cake and paid for it with food stamps. I thought the checkout lady would burn a whole through me with her eyes. She didn't know the cake was for my little girl's birthday. It will be her last. She has cancer and will be dead in six months." Before you criticize or abuse, walk a mile in another's shoes.

When Bob Knight was fired as head basketball coach of Indiana University, a sports announcer asked the legendary John Wooden to comment. Wooden replied, "I'm not a judge so therefore I'm not judging Bobby Knight." Then he went on to quote this old poem:

*There is so much good in the worse of us,
And so much bad in the best of us,
That it hardly behooves any of us
To talk about the rest of us.*

When it comes to making judgments, know what is

holy. Look at verse 6: "Do not give what is holy to dogs and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you." Some scholars say this is a misplaced passage—that it really doesn't belong here. Perhaps it is. But what if it's not? What if Jesus meant for it to be here? Maybe it's calling us to spiritual discernment. You do not give sacred meat offered in temple sacrifices to wild dogs on the street. It is holy. You do not use pearl covered temple goblets to feed the hogs. Pigs have no appreciation for the finer things. You need to know what is holy and treat it as holy.

In this age of tolerance, where anything goes, where nothing is sacred, where people are encouraged to do their own thing and believe whatever works for them in their own way—we best beware of profaning the holy, compromising the absolute, and lowering the standards of morality to the lowest common denominator. Treat holy things in holy ways. After all, we do have a judge. God is His name. His standard is high, He loves us unconditionally but His approval is not unconditional. God expects us to be good stewards of that which is sacred. He expects us to be good stewards of the gospel entrusted to us. He does not ask us to be flawless but He does expect us to be faithful.

Because of our strong ecumenical stance, our critics often say, "You can believe almost anything and still be a Methodist." I've had people say that to me. Nothing could be further from the truth. Wesley was an adamant foe of dead orthodoxy and nominal Christianity. Salvation for him was a new life of holiness and a wonderful gift of God, which has at its core a love for God and neighbor. When it came to belief in the triune God, the deity of Christ, the authority of scripture, and our redemption through the cross, Wesley never wavered in his convictions, whatever the conflict.

If Methodists want to stay in the religious marketplace of the 21st century, we will blow the dust off our Articles of Religion and our confessions of faith. We will remember the kind of people that we really are. We may argue forever

about our social principles but let there be no confusion about our beliefs, lest we surrender our high ideals to the swine of society. When it comes to making judgments, know in your heart what is holy and hold on to it with all your might.

When it comes to making judgments, keep an open mind. Did you hear the text? Verse 7 and 8: "Ask and it will be given you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks, receives, and everyone who searches, finds, and everyone who knocks, will find the door opened."

A young woman brought her fiance' home to meet her parents. The father led him into the study and proceeded to interrogate him. "So what are your plans?" asked the dad. "I'm a Bible scholar," said the boy. "And what will you do to provide a nice home for my daughter as she deserves?" "I will study and God will provide," said the boy. "And when you have children, how will you provide for them?" asked the father. "Don't worry," said the boy, "God will provide." A little bit later in the kitchen the mother asked the father how it went. The father replied, "Well, it's one of those good news/bad news deals. The kid has no job, no plans, no place to live, but he does think that I am God so I think he's going to be ok." Even though it may come as a terrible surprise to some of you today, you are not God. You do not have the final answer. You don't operate with all the evidence. You don't know everything about everything.

Dennis the Menace said once in a cartoon, "My grandpa says you learn most everything after you think you know it all." Dennis is right. People, who want to eradicate the world of evil and do away with all the wrong, scare me to death. It reminds me of the parable Jesus told about the sower and the seed. The sower went out and sowed a field with wheat and that night a very evil thing happened. Somebody else went out and sowed the field full of weeds. In a few weeks, both plants spouted. When they had grown a little, the workers came to the owner and said, "Do you want us to go out and root out all of the weeds?" The owner

replied, "Absolutely not. Let them both grow together until harvest lest we tear up more than we clear out."

When it comes to making judgments, play fair.

Verse 12: "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you." We call it the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule does not say do it to others as they do it to you. The golden rule does not say do it to others before they have a chance to do it to you. The Golden Rule says treat others like you want to be treated. Is that so hard? Why can't society embrace this simple principle? Treat others like you want to be treated.

How do you want to be treated? I'd like to be treated respectfully. I am a child of the universe. No less than the moon and the stars, I have a place here and so do you. If I expect a place for me, I need to provide a place for you. Respect—is it really too much to ask?

Henry Knight in his book, *Conversation Matters*, says we've entered an era of history where we demonize those who disagree with us. It is certainly evident in the political arena. It is also evident in the Church. It's a staple of fund raising letters from both the left and the right. The theme is always the same. The barbarians at the gate are fully intending to do you in, but their evil schemes can be stopped if you will just send a contribution right away. Such demonizing leads us to believe things about other persons that are just not true. We wind up saying things about people that we would never say about them individually. Let's just stop it!

We love to categorize people in our society. Somehow we think if we can get people boxed in to some pigeonhole then we can control them. Then we will be safe. So we put labels on people. We've got all kinds of labels. They're liberal or conservative, they're straight or gay, they're pro-choice or pro-life, they're localist or connectionalist if your in our denomination. He's a Vanderbilt grad or she's an Asbury grad. We've got a label for everybody. Why? Why can't we just respect people for being people and leave the labels

alone. Treat others like you would like to be treated. Is that too much to ask? I don't want a lot from other people, I just want a little respect.

I'd like when we get in the game of life, to play fair. How about you? I'd like for the same rules to apply to everybody.

Deborah Tannen of Georgetown University says we live in an argument culture. We assume the best way to get things done is to set up a debate where somebody wins and somebody loses. We're on the edge of the football season. Half of all professional football players go home losers every Sunday. Does that have to be like that in real life? Isn't there a fairer way of dealing with differences than choosing up sides so there are winners and losers? What's wrong with winners and winners? What happens if we truly listen to one another? What if success were not a matter of competition but a matter of completion? What if we changed the rules of the game so that it's fair for everybody who's in the game? I don't want much—I'd just like to treat others the way I hope to be treated. When it comes to making judgments, play fair.

In the movie, *Chocolat*, a mysterious woman moves into a little uptight French village and opens a chocolate shop. With her magic chocolate she teaches people to embrace each other rather than reject each other. In doing so, she brings freedom and joy to guilt-ridden, uptight townspeople--even the old town father who's sure he's never going to ever change. But I have good news for you today. Somebody greater than the chocolate lady has landed on planet earth. His name is Jesus Christ and He's present with us in the person of the Holy Spirit. By His grace and under His power, we just might learn what it means to accept one another, embrace one another in this human family.

Judge not that you be not judged. That is the gospel, as I understand it. Amen.

