

Reading: Matthew 7:1-23

Theme: The Jesus Principle.

It is so easy to dislike or criticize something that another person really likes – be it décor, clothes, fashion, food, music and we could go on. Just because something is not to our taste does not mean it is useless, a waste of time and no good. Yet it is too easy to also criticize other people... As we begin to look at Matthew 7 remember it is still part of the Sermon on the Mount. Most commentators agree that in this section, Jesus stresses living our lives aware of God's judgement - not as a cruel harsh judge, but as our Father watching over us for our ultimate good in all things. We are to be concerned for His approval and not worry about our ego or reputation. We are to live in the light of the time when we will appear before God. For some the thought of God as Father and as Judge seems to be contradictory and they cannot think of God as both. Yet, as our heavenly Father who loves His children, He will judge correctly and discipline. Both aspects go hand-in-hand and are clearly presented in Scripture. We should live aware and conscious that life itself is only a passing and fleeting thing and one day we must meet God.

This last section of the Sermon on the Mount has, woven throughout it, judgement as its theme– not only in v1-6 but in the need to enter the narrow gate contrasted to the broad road which ends in destruction; the casting away of the false prophets; the destruction of lives not built upon the truth of Jesus' words. So, we are to live aware of the all-seeing eye of our Father upon us. This is to also affect our attitudes of judging others - which the Lord Jesus deals with in v1-6. Here, as in other places, the Lord Jesus says something and

then explains, gives reasons why this is so. He gives the principle and enlarges upon the principle, showing why it is a right and proper principle.

Here the principle is “*Do not judge*” (v1a) and the rest of v1-6 is His enlargement, reasons why this principle is right and this gives us the 2 main divisions of the 1st 6 verses: A. The Principle Given (v1a); B. The Principle Enlarged On (v1b-6). Let’s look at the first of those divisions, but enlarging on it to see what Jesus is saying to us:

A. The Principle Given (v1a)

Here the Lord Jesus is giving a caution against judging “*Do not judge...*”, “*Judge not*” (AV). Regrettably these words are often quoted by people who like it so that they can accept any and every view and idea, or those who want their views accepted and they argue that we are not judge them! It fits in with modern philosophy - that all views are equally valid and all must be tolerated and Jesus’ words here are considered as brilliant, bang up-to-date and so we are urged to listen to Him, not to judge, not to condemn but accept every and all views equally and we are not to rock anybody’s boat. Yet, is that what Jesus means? I don’t think so. Let’s note 3 things from this principle:

1. What It Does Not Mean!

The Lord Jesus does not prohibit any judging whatsoever - people, ideas, teaching or behaviour. For He Himself goes on to say in v15-16 “*Watch out for false prophets... By their fruit you will recognise them.*” How can we do that unless we use our minds to make judgements and decisions upon them?

How will we see they are wolves in sheep's clothing unless our critical faculties are used? Jesus is not meaning we should be flabby, free and easy and accept all people and all points of view.

Neither does it mean we are to be neutral about matters of good and evil, accept all ideas of morality equally or with indifference. Nor does it mean courts, civil authorities, police etc. have to be abandoned. From other parts of Scripture we see civil powers and authorities are put in place by God as a means of restraining evil. So, the government, laws, taxes, police, magistrates are to be respected and obeyed if they do not go against God's word as they are entrusted with authority from God to judge and to pass sentence.

Jesus' words here certainly do not mean that the church is to be an easy-going place where any and every behaviour is tolerated. The local church, a group of local churches, has the authority and the right to exercise judgement and impose discipline. Our Christian forefathers saw the local church, as a gathering of God's chosen people, where God's word is preached, the means of grace are used and discipline is exercised. Those in authority in the church have the power and authority from God to judge and exercise spiritual discipline for both the well-being of the person and of the local body of God's people. Jesus' words do not remove this privilege and responsibility.

Jesus' words do not mean that we are to accept all ideas and teaching without question as it arises within the church in discussions or from the pulpit. We are to realise there will be

false prophets and we are to test what they say and do for we are to examine the fruit of their lives - to see if their lives are lived in accord with sound doctrine. Paul wrote to the Galatians and warned of another (but false) gospel and said that if he or an angel preached it then they would be cursed until the Lord comes (1:8-9). John, the apostle of love, says we are to test the spirits to see if they are of God (1 John 4:1) and warns not to have anything to do with false teachers. Recognise that Jesus in this principle is not saying we are to have no opinion, that there can be no basis for saying a thing is true and another is false or one thing pleases God, one another displeases Him.

If that were the case then this church has no basis for existing as we should quite happily join with any and every church or faith. Yet if there is truth, if there is right practice and right doctrine, then we are to know such, discern it and rightly but lovingly point out error and have nothing to do with such, especially if it concerns salvation truth and the Lord Jesus. So those who deny that Jesus is the Christ, is God, or that He has risen from the dead, or who deny the Bible is God's word from beginning to end or any other primary salvation truths are not to be countenanced, entered into fellowship with on a church basis. Even in such, we are to be loving and patient as far as possible as we realise they may be untaught or mistaken and not entrenched in error. Moving on we will see:

2. What It Does Mean.

Jesus is not saying we cannot use assessments to discern between right and wrong, truth and error and base our judgements on such a discernment. What He means is that we

are not to judge people in such a way as we will then write them off and condemn them to a scrapheap of our own labelling and making. Jesus warns of the terrible danger of condemning, of pronouncing judgement in a final sense – as if we were the divine and ultimate authority.

The Pharisees were often like this. They had their rules and regulations, their fasts, their ways of doing things – there was their way and all the rest were wrong ways! If others did not do or think as they did, then the others were written off, condemned e.g. Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple. They had this wrong-attitude-judging, writing off and condemning others. Do not leave this to Bible times, to the Pharisees, but realise such ones have been present throughout church history and are still present in our days.

Jesus' words here mean we are not to judge rashly, nor pass judgement on another believer in Christ, or anyone else that has no ground of evidence - other than a suspicion of our own mind, or even from the jealousy for own heart. It means we are not to make the worst of people by misconstruing their words or actions - by thinking the worst of what they said or did not say; did or did not do! There is to be no unmerciful judgements, especially based on a single act. We are not to judge others' hearts or intentions as if we were God and knew clearly what was in their heart and mind. The Lord Jesus in these words warns against, prohibits and condemns the spirit of judging harshly, self-righteously, without mercy or love in a hypocritical manner.

We are to be discerning, discriminating, can even be **constructively critical** but we are not to be hypercritical, not fault finding in a harsh manner. Jesus bans such inclinations in us all to discover and severely condemn the faults of others - whether real or imagined faults. Often such judgements and condemnations can be accompanied by a glossing over or passing over our own faults - as Jesus goes on to humorously illustrate... We should be on our guard that we are not guilty of breaking this principle for it is so easy to fall into and is a real danger for us all! Let's see and note regarding this principle:

3. How It Reveals Itself.

Jesus has to warn His disciples, which also includes us, regarding such a danger of judging and condemning others. Sadly, it is never as obvious as that but often reveals itself in ways we feel are not wrong – for us! Here are **some of the ways** this condemning spirit may show itself:

It is always self-righteous - self, self-worth, our reputation, our experience is there. We feel superior, know better and may unintentionally look down on others. We see this in the Pharisees. It is present when this principle is not lived out and there is an air of authority over others, that would not be tolerated if others did it to them! It can show in a person's word having to be law for other people, because they know best! Do we feel like this? If so, we are to be warned as we may not be heeding our Lord's words here.

This condemning spirit may show itself in a **hypercritical tendency**. True criticism has its aim to be good, constructive

and **truly** for the others benefit. We should learn to be able to handle such if it is given in a spirit of love, but a hypercritical spirit is destructive. Not that such hyper criticism is always expressed, for it may be present in attitude, looks, thought and the heart. The hypercritical spirit is the opposite of the spirit of love is found in 1 Corinthians 13 (v4-7 especially). A hypercritical spirit is always looking for faults, reasons to justify itself and is never happy until these are found and in a sense the condemning spirit is glad when it has found fault with people. Even if no fault is found, yet some criticism is levelled e.g. of the sermon - too short, too long, too light, too heavy, too humorous, too morbid etc.

The condemning, judging spirit puts **prejudices in place of principle**, often linked with personalities. A person is considered as never getting anything right and immediately they, their words and actions are written off or quickly will be. A preacher may preach and someone among his hearers may be disaffected with him, so his sermon is dismissed, truths said are ignored. Another preacher may say the same things but these are welcomed, held up as great and wonderful. The principle of the Lord is ignored and judgements are made according to prejudices, personalities and not scriptural principles.

A condemning, judging spirit **jumps in with no knowledge of the facts** of the matter, the circumstances of the person's real needs. We can be so ready to give someone a blast of correction, of instruction, of the wisdom of our experience and yet we may be ignorant of many things. Instead of condemning, the real course of action the Lord would have us

take is mercy, is encouragement, is strengthening the person and getting alongside them. If we knew their circumstances, the facts of the matter or their difficulties then we would hush our mouths and our condemning spirit.

The condemning spirit is **quick to write people off**, to condemn them to the scrapheap **for ever** as no hopers. It is a condemnation of the people themselves - not just condemnation of their actions, words, ideas and teaching, but them as a person with all they are, do or say. There is a world of difference between differing with and being critical of a person's views, teaching or life and condemning them "*lock, stock and barrel*". To condemn someone finally is God's prerogative alone and yet we may presume to have His knowledge and His throne in our attitudes and dealings with others.

Now then, as I close, are we guilty of such a wrong spirit? If so we need to seek God's help to expose such in us to ourselves and then ask Him for mercy and how we are to deal with our wrongly critical spirit. Such a condemning judgemental spirit is not good, is not right for any child of God to harbour. It is outlawed by the Lord Jesus. Next week we will see **The Principle Enlarged On** as Jesus drives things home as He gives us, opens up to us reasons why such a condemning spirit is wrong. I pray God would help us all to search our own hearts and that we would live correctly in the light of His all-seeing and discerning sight.