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Matthew 7:1-5

“Judging Others”

Pastor Wayne Puls, Senior Pastor at Hope Lutheran Church

I actually wrote two different versions of today’s sermon. Some of you will be very excited to know that I’m going to preach both of them.

Here’s version 1. “Jesus prohibits judging. Amen.” That’s really the whole sermon, right there in three words.

But let’s go on with version 2. Because those three words, “Jesus prohibits judging,” though absolutely true, are really tough to live by. So let’s explore Jesus’ prohibition in its context, dig a little deeper, and wrestle with what it means for us.

“Judge not,” Jesus said. Our Lord spoke these words as part of his famous Sermon on the Mount. Let’s talk quickly about the setting, the audience, and the basic message for his sermon, before we talk about judging others.

First, the sermon’s setting. This took place near the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. Matthew tells us Jesus had already been traveling around teaching in the synagogues, preaching other sermons, and healing all kinds of people.

Well, one day, as crowds of people were beginning to follow him, Jesus went up on a mountain. He sat down, and his followers gathered around to hear his words. Reminiscent of Moses going up on a mountain to receive God’s Law, here is God’s Son, on another mountain, revealing God’s authoritative teachings to his people.

Let's be clear, next, on the audience. These were disciples, or followers, of Jesus, Matthew tells us. His Sermon on the Mount was aimed not at strangers or newcomers. Jesus was talking to those people who'd heard his preaching, witnessed his miracles – people who were experiencing, as Pastor Lew mentioned last week, that God's kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, was at hand, in the person of Jesus Christ.

So what's the basic message of the Sermon on the Mount? Jesus is teaching us about Christian ethics, giving us the Christian moral code, if you will, for a wide range of life situations. How should Christians act? Jesus tells us. How should Christians think, and shape their attitudes? Jesus tells us. How should Christians pray? Jesus tells us. He touches on many different topics and life situations in this one sermon.

But please notice that this is not just a list of mandatory works of righteousness. This is not the list of required steps, if we want a shot at getting into heaven. So what is the Sermon on the Mount? It's a description of Christian living for those who are experiencing God's grace. For those who were coming to know Jesus, seeing and hearing God's divine power and mercy through him, their hearts were changing. Their minds were changing. Their lives were changing. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus describes Christian living for those experiencing God's grace.

One of his sermon topics, and our special focus today, is judging others. Let's talk about that difficult word, "judge." What does it mean here in Christ's sermon? Well, clearly Jesus is not objecting to the legal judiciary. He's also not saying that we shouldn't ever distinguish between right and wrong, in a general way, or discriminate between good and evil. What Jesus is prohibiting, among his followers, is that attitude that condemns others. Looking at another's

behaviors, or political views, or lifestyle choices, and censuring them – judging them – in our minds, with our words, on Twitter/Instagram/Facebook. It’s so hard, isn’t it, for us not to criticize and reproach the losers out there, the sinners, the evildoers. But Jesus firmly warns us against judging others.

“Judge not, that you be not judged,” Jesus says. “For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.” Boy, that should make us squirm. Jesus gives us the stern reminder, as the Bible does in many places, that if you’re going to find fault with others, you run the risk of God, the ultimate judge, finding fault with you. There’s this uncomfortable but undeniable connection, Jesus teaches, between God’s mercy toward you and your attitude toward others.

My attitude toward others either betrays my self-concern, or it betrays my experience of God’s mercy. Which does Jesus expect of me, as his forgiven, mercy-receiving follower? Or of you? Does our attitude toward others reflect the divine mercy we’ve experienced? Or does it reflect only our own likes, dislikes, prejudices, and fears?

Jesus prohibits judging. He offers the hilarious image of someone spotting a tiny speck in another person’s eye, but not noticing a log in his own eye. He says, “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” He’s telling us that our act of judging betrays the beam in our own eye. Judging others reveals our hypocrisy.

Sometimes we Christians think we are supposed to go around admonishing and correcting the wrongdoers around us. Jesus teaches us today that this is a false priority. Correcting others is a false priority. The true priority of a

follower of Jesus? Personal repentance. Admit your own sin. Recognize your own problems. Humbly beg God's forgiveness for your flaws, before you even think to point a finger at anyone else's.

Jesus is not saying we shouldn't care about the sins of others. He's not asking Christians to be ignoring, excusing, or condoning such sins. But by prohibiting judging, Jesus is challenging us to shift our attitude toward others. Having Christ Jesus in your heart and mind absolutely should change your heart and mind toward others. Christians need to learn to experience and share God's mercy, above all else, in our dealings with others.

And this is not an isolated appeal. In the same sermon, Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." In the Beatitudes, he teaches, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." And in another part of the sermon, Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." "Judge not," he says.

We are followers of Jesus. So we follow him. May God help us to hear his words, to take them to heart, and, motivated always by his mercy, to follow Jesus in our lives. Amen.