

SLIDE 1

Planks and Pearls

Matthew 7:1-6

West Valley Presbyterian Church, October 8, 2023

How many of us have ever had the verse, “Judge not, that ye not be judged,” quoted at them? I have; usually by former Christians who are antsy about being around a pastor who by definition must be judgey. What does Jesus actually have to say about the way we decide what is good and what is not? Let’s listen carefully to the familiar words of Matthew 7:1-6. Jesus says:

SLIDES 2-7

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

“Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.”

Here ends the reading of God’s holy word. Thanks be to God.

Now that we hear the whole context of Jesus’ statement, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged”, we can hear that it’s not intended to be combative, as it’s often quoted today. Jesus continues, “For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged.” We do, and we should judge; the question is, how? How do we discern what’s the right thing to do?

Jesus also says, “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.” Here again we are expected to judge. We have to decide what is sacred and immensely valuable. And we also have to decide what’s appropriate for a given situation. What do my dogs need? They need love and dog food, not Scripture lessons. That’s a judgment. What do pigs need? They need space to dig, and food to eat, not my most valuable jewels. I make those judgments for their good and for my own.

In fact, if we think about it, we realize that we all make judgments, all the time. It’s impossible not to judge. We judge what is safe to eat and what is not. We judge what is a safe activity and what is not. We judge whether someone is a friend, or not. So Jesus isn’t saying that we should never judge anything; that would be impossible. What Jesus is saying is that we need to discern carefully what’s going on with other people, because there’s all kinds of stuff going on within each of us - which makes it really hard to see what’s going on in someone else.

OK. So how do we discern what’s the right way to judge? Well, remember back in Chapter 5, where Jesus says, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy”? Showing mercy involves judging, because we are discerning what to show mercy for. And in Chapter 6, in the Lord’s Prayer, we are taught to say, “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”? Forgiving our debtors

involves judging, because we are reflecting on what is owed to us, and comparing that with what we owe to God. Mercy and forgiveness are both part of the right way to judge ourselves and those around us. Remember? “In the same way you judge others, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

That’s what we need to keep in mind as we think about the speck and the plank. It is SO much easier to see faults in other people, than in ourselves! We don’t want to see faults in ourselves; but we do want to see faults in others, because then we can try to justify ourselves.

For example, when I was a kid, teachers would organize the class into two teams before we went outside at recess; and we played all those games involving those squidgy red rubber balls. Remember them? Well, I was then, and still am now, clumsy and uncoordinated – a liability to whichever team I was assigned to. My reluctant teammates would always groan and complain, “We have to have HER? We’ll lose for sure!” Which hurt me; that was a fault on their part. But then I would retaliate by making sure that everyone knew that I was the best musician and the best student. Which, now that I think about it as an adult, probably hurt them too. I could easily see my classmates’ fault. I couldn’t easily see my own.

I wonder why it’s so much easier to see the speck in someone else’s eye, but not notice the plank in our own? Maybe it’s because we are so used to the plank being there, that we don’t even see it any more? Maybe we also no longer notice what the plank is blocking out? Or even worse, maybe we do know we have a plank in our eye but we have made a virtue out of it? As in, “I want to focus on me. I don’t want to focus on them. And with this plank, I can’t see them, and that’s fine.” As it says in Proverbs 21:2 – “A person may think their own ways are right, but the Lord weighs the heart.” We do indeed often think that our ways are right; and we usually can’t see how wrong they are.

These days, when we get a speck in our eye, we would not expect someone to remove it for us. We would go into the nearest bathroom, wash our hands, look in the mirror, and carefully wash the speck out. But in Jesus’ day, offering to remove a speck from someone’s eye was regarded as very helpful. In Jesus’ day there was no indoor plumbing; and there also were no mirrors for anyone except the ruling family. Two thousand years ago, mirrors were not made of glass and aluminum; they were made of exceedingly expensive polished metal. So if you got something in your eye two thousand years ago, you’d depend on someone else to remove the speck for you. They’d be doing you a favor, and you would want to be relieved of discomfort.

So Jesus isn’t criticizing the person just because he offers to take the speck out of a brother’s eye. That would be expected, and regarded as helpful, presuming that the person removing the speck could see what he was doing. What Jesus is criticizing is how we regard our own sins compared to other people’s sins.

For example, I’m sure you’ve all seen the Wizard of Oz movie, right? Well, do you remember the scene when Miss Gulch arrives at Dorothy’s house to take Toto away in a basket to the sheriff? To be destroyed for having bitten Miss Gulch? And if they didn’t surrender Toto, she would bring

the law down on them, and they would lose their farm? Then I'm sure you also remember how aggressively self-righteous Miss Gulch is. Stiff straight back, tight mouth, scowl on her face. It's true that owners should control their dogs and not allow them to bite people. But that's a speck compared to the plank of causing one's neighbors to lose their farm. Miss Gulch's sins are far worse than Dorothy's. But Miss Gulch doesn't see it that way at all. She sees herself as completely justified and in the right. The plank in her eye is very large indeed.

Who are the people that you know well enough, to be able to see specks in their eyes? Do you care about them? Do you want to be able to help them when they need it?

Then what do we need to do, to see clearly enough to help them remove the specks? Jesus says we need to first take out the plank in our own eye. OK, but how do we do that? Especially if we don't even notice that we have a plank in our eye? Miss Gulch didn't think she was a sinner, right? She didn't need to have any planks removed from her eye, thank you very much! Thankfully, none of us here are anywhere like THAT self-righteous. None of us would say that we never sin. We know we make mistakes; we know we sin. We've lived long enough to know that we aren't perfect and never will be in this life. But we can't see those planks. We can't see ourselves as God does. So how would we remove them?

The answer to that is, we can't. But God can. God knows each and every one of us better than we know ourselves. So how do we ask God to remove those planks?

In Richard Foster's book on Prayer, which the Women's Bible study groups are using, he has a section called the Prayer of Examen (*exaymen*). One part of that is to ask God to search ourselves, and reveal ourselves, to ourselves. As the Psalmist does in Psalm 139, we ask God to search us and know our hearts, to test us and know our thoughts, to make known our sinfulness to us and lead us in the way everlasting. Then we sit quietly before God and do our best to reflect on what comes up. And we offer to God both our strengths and our weaknesses. We don't need to hide before God – and it would be pointless to try, since God knows us a lot better than we do. We don't see the planks. But God does, and can show them to us, so that we can ask him to remove them. Which, over time, he will.

As God clears our vision, then we will be much better able to see the specks in the eyes of those we love: our family, our friends, our brothers and sisters in Christ. And, as God clears our vision, we will also be much better able to give the right gifts in the right situations: to give sacred pearls to those who need them, and to give to God's creatures what they need.

So we are going to try a Prayer of Examen, right now. We're going to use a reflection on the Lord's Prayer, which I will say, very slowly, to give you the opportunity to ask God to reveal yourself, to yourself. May we all see ourselves as God sees us.

Our Father, who is in heaven...(You are God, creator of the entire universe and everything in it. You know everything about us. Make us known to ourselves.)

Hallowed be your name. (When have I marveled at who you are and what you have done?)

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. (When have I failed to do your will? And when have I done your will? What do you want of me, at this point in my life?)

Give us today our daily bread. (What is it, Lord, that I most need? Help me to receive whatever you give.)

Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. (What have I done, that you would rather I hadn't done? Forgive me, Lord. And what have others done to me, that I would rather they hadn't done? Help me to forgive them.)

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. (Where have I fallen into temptation? And where do I need deliverance from evil? Free me, that I might live as yours forever.)

For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen.