

Series: *A Faith that Makes a Difference*

“Faith without Judging”

Introduction: As you read through the NT letters, written primarily to the early, 1st century churches, you will notice many similar themes. One theme that is significant is the need for Christians to “grow up,” to mature in our faith, becoming more and more like Jesus as we go. This is true for us not only as individuals, but also as churches. Churches are known as the “body of Christ” because together, we are to be the arms and legs of Jesus in the world. In this growing process, we have a role to play in each other’s lives. Paul describes this role to the church in Ephesus in this way: “. . . speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ” (4:15). And a bit later he adds, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (4:29). This role, in other words, involves things we may need to say to one another. And, importantly, *how* we say these things is significant; it may make the difference in how we are heard, or if we are heard at all.

James, as we have hopefully noticed in our journey with him over the past few months, is genuinely concerned about *how* we say things, about how we use our words. The tongue, he has reminded us, has great power, the power to bless or the power to curse. With our tongue we can praise God and build each other up, or we can fight and quarrel and tear each other down. In our text for this morning, James zeroes in on the tendency we can have to use our words in a judgmental way. How can we guard against judging one another, against being judgmental, and instead, exercise judgment in a loving, life-giving, maturing, building one another up kind of way?

I. Judgment vs. Judgmental

A. We begin by noting that there is a significant difference between exercising judgment and being judgmental. On the one hand, exercising judgment is something God’s calls us to do. We are to exercise judgment between what is good behavior and what is bad behavior. We are to judge between false teaching and truthful teaching. We are to judge as to whether a person’s immoral actions should cause them to be removed from a faith community. Further, parents are to pay close attention to the behavior of their children, teachers are to grade papers and exams, and the police are called to enforce the law, all of which call for making some kind of judgment. To “discern” or “assess” are helpful synonyms here.

B. On the other hand, judging, or being judgmental, as both James and Jesus talk about it, is to be avoided. Such speech, James writes, involves “slander” and “speaking against” another. The word for slander here is a broad term. It includes name calling, the spreading of lies, gossip, criticism, and condemnation. The issue is making a negative evaluation of another with a critical or condemning spirit. James says that when we do this, we’re actually sitting in judgment on the law, by which he probably means, from a reference earlier in his letter, God’s call upon us to love our neighbor as ourselves (2:8; Lev. 19:16-18). And not only are we treating God’s law as if it didn’t matter, we’re putting ourselves in the place of Lawgiver and Judge.

C. What might this look like? Here are some areas where it can happen.

1. Money: "Can you believe she bought one of those?! How much do you think that cost him? Where did they get the money? Why didn't they give it to the church?!"
2. Children: "Can you believe where they are letting their children go? Did you see what their kids are wearing? Can you believe how those kids are (not) behaving? What kind of parents would allow that?"
3. Time: "Can you believe what they are going to do on their vacation? Don't you wonder what he does on Sunday mornings? You'd think she'd need to work more in order to make ends meet."
4. Politics: "Did you see how he voted on that article? How in the world could she vote for that candidate? How can you call yourself a Christian and support that program? Did you see who was marching in that parade?"

Indeed, well may we need to speak to someone regarding their use of money, or how they are raising their children, or how they are spending their time, or what the fullness of a Christian worldview may look like. But even if we've "judged" a situation correctly, even if we think we're right, can we do it in a loving, maturing, life-giving, build one another up kind of way, instead of a critical and condemning manner that attacks their worth as human beings and gets a "Who in the world do you think you are" kind of response? How do we speak the truth in love?

II. Judging in a Helpful Manner

A. First, be self-aware about what is in our hearts, which, you'll recall, is where James says our words come from. That is, we often feel a need to point out what we feel are the shortcomings of others because it makes us feel better about ourselves. Especially if we're not feeling so good about ourselves lately, one sure way to feel boosted is by knocking others down. So, we need to do a heart check.

I think when Jesus tells us to take the plank out of our own eye before addressing the speck of sawdust in the eye of another, this judgmental spirit is what he is talking about. He's not saying that if we get rid of our sin we should feel free to go after our neighbor's. He's saying that if we come at our neighbor with a judgmental spirit, without evidence that we have worked on our own stuff, they won't even begin to hear what we have to say. Like Jesus goes on to illustrate with the pigs and the pearls, the pigs just simply cannot digest the pearls. After a few days, they will turn on the farmer, if that's what he continues to try and feed them. In like manner, if our approach is flawed, if it appears as if we're not growing, if people don't feel loved, they will not be able to digest what we have to say. They will feel judged, not listened to or supported, and will begin to strike back.

B. Second, make time for prayer. Or, as Jesus goes on to put it, "ask, seek, knock," and then, "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Ma. 7:7, 12). Taking time to pray helps us pause and ponder: "Am I rightly understanding this situation my neighbor seems to be in? What's the real and underlying issue? Have I spent time really listening to this person and where they are coming from? Am I willing to be a part of the solution? Where does grace fit into the puzzle? How might I be trying to play God in this person's life? Am I trying to direct this person to God, or just change their behavior or thinking? How would I want them to approach me?"

C. So, to sum up, here's what I'd offer. When you feel a need to "correct," to help someone grow, put your list of wrongs away and spend one week praying for your neighbor. Don't pray about the

situation, or how to fix them, just pray for them, for their well-being and for their relationship with God. Over the course of the second week, ask God how he might want to use you in this person's life. How is it that you might be able to stand with this person in the struggle they are facing? In the third week, give this person a call and just sit down with them. Ask them how life is going and be ready to listen. After you have listened well, go home and pray some more! Ask God for the discernment to help you know how to lovingly build this person up so that they might mature, you might mature, and the body of Christ of which you are a part might mature, all to serve and glorify the living, loving God.