

Reserving Judgment
Matthew 7:1–5; Luke 18:9–14
Sunday, October 26, 2025

Let us pray: Lord, show us what it means to follow you, and help us trust you enough to take a step, in Christ. Amen.

When I was in seminary, there was another student a couple of years ahead of me who we all just *knew* was going to be a great pastor. He was smart and faithful and kind. He was a great preacher and had a great voice that you just loved to listen to. He was the sixth generation in his family to go into ministry. He was tall and good-looking with perfect hair. If you had asked us which student was going to go on to be the successful pastor of a large church, almost everybody would have said *him*. And he *did* go on to be the successful pastor of a large church! His sermons were on TV and the radio. He was a prominent leader in the community. His congregation loved him.

Back at the beginning of September, news broke that he had been removed from his position and suspended from ministry for three years, following a yearlong investigation by the presbytery that uncovered a five-year pattern of extramarital affairs that he had concealed from his family and the church. And when I say *news broke*, I mean *news broke*. The story got picked up by Yahoo and some major newspapers and it was all over social media. When I found out, I was absolutely *shocked*. Because this did not at all fit with the person I've known for 24 years. I read a bunch of articles, trying to get more information that I hoped would help me *understand* this better and make sense out of it. And in the process of reading all those articles and social media posts, I made a fatal mistake: I started reading the comments section.

I do not encourage you to read online comments in general. In fact, I actively *discourage* you from doing it! Nothing good happens in the comments section. But I do want to share with you just a sample of what I came across:

Of course it's the Christians. Hypocrites. Churches are just a safe haven for predators.

I'm soooo shocked that a pastor would do this. They spend their lives lying to people!

There's another one who doesn't practice what he preaches.

Typical mainline liberal. And a comment on a different article that said, Another family values Christian conservative!

Just because your parents were called to ministry doesn't mean you are!

One commenter actually tried to be compassionate and said, *Yes, he's a pastor. But he's also human and just as susceptible to sin as the rest of us. We should pray for him and his church.* To which another commenter replied, *People like you are the reason they keep getting away with it!*

Multiple comments questioning his love for God and his family.

And an overwhelming majority of the comments saying, "He's only sorry because he got caught!"

All these people who do not even *know* him were making judgments, acting like they knew exactly why he did what he did. And a lot of them were people who identified themselves in their comments as Christians. I'm not *defending* him, because if I'm being honest, I judged him, too.

Over the past few weeks, we have been looking at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the most extensive teaching we have from Jesus about what it looks like to follow him. We have seen that it is about caring for people's spiritual *and* physical needs. It is about loving your neighbor *and* your enemy, treating them the way you want to be treated. It is about being persistent in your prayer life, nurturing your relationship with God, so that you can *know God* and gain a better understanding of God's will for you. And today we heard Jesus talk in Matthew's version of this sermon about judging others. "Do not judge, so that you may not *be* judged. For with the judgment you make, you will be judged. First look at *yourself* and *your own* sin," Jesus says, "before you criticize anyone else."

Years ago I learned about this psychological concept called *trait transference*. What happens is, people unconsciously associate what you say about the qualities of *other people* with the qualities of *you yourself*. So if I'm talking to you and I say, "Oh, you know Bill. He's so arrogant and judgmental," you will unconsciously associate *me* with arrogance and judgment. If I say, "Bill is such a kind, generous, loving person," you're going to unconsciously associate *me* with kindness, generosity, and love. Or as Jesus says here, "With the judgment you *make*, you will be *judged*."

And he says almost the same thing in Luke's version of the sermon. "Do not judge, and you will not *be* judged. Do not condemn, and you will not *be* condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." So instead of looking at what Jesus says *there*, we're going to look instead at an *example* of judging that Jesus gives us in Luke 18:9–14:

⁹He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Here’s the funny thing about that parable. How many of us heard that and thought, “Boy, I’m sure glad I’m not like that Pharisee!” Judging others is a tendency that comes all too naturally to us. We judge people’s intentions. We judge their appearances. We judge people based on the way that they *talk*. We judge the choices that people make with how they use their money. We judge people based on where they live, the cars they drive, the jobs they have, the schools they went to. We judge people based on who they are related to. We judge people for this one thing they said or did ten years ago. We judge people for judging people. Basically, you name anything about a person, and we can find a way to judge them for it; to say, “They are *this* kind of person because of *that*.”

And it is just as easy to say, “You shouldn’t do that. You shouldn’t judge people.” But if it were that easy, we wouldn’t do it! We have to make a very intentional effort *not* to do it. So how can we do that?

I think we have to start with the realization that we are *going* to judge people. That’s just how human minds work. The human brain wants to *categorize*. It’s how we make sense of the people and the world around us. Our minds want to say, “This thing or this person is like *this*, and so it belongs *here*.” You are not going to *never* judge someone. The challenge is to *catch ourselves doing it* and to stop in the moment; to pull ourselves back from judgment. It’s when we catch ourselves saying, “Oh, *of course* that person...” to stop ourselves and say, “You know what, I shouldn’t say that.” “What is wrong with that person? Why are they acting like that...” we stop and say either out loud or to ourselves, “I shouldn’t say that. I’m being judgmental.”

Because here's the reality: *you don't know*. You cannot see the entirety of that other person's life. You do not know everything that person is dealing with right now.

The guy that you're judging because he's acting like a jerk, yelling at an employee in a store? You don't know that he has been taking care of his sick wife, and he is absolutely at his limit physically and emotionally.

The kid you're judging because they're acting out in school or church? You have no idea what kind of abuse they're enduring at home.

That person you're judging because they're "acting weird" in public? You don't know if they're on the autism spectrum.

The person you're judging for their political beliefs, you have no idea what kind of experiences have shaped them throughout their life to cause them to feel the way they do.

You cannot possibly know everything that other person is dealing with or *has* dealt with throughout their life. Why? *Because you are not God*. You cannot see the entirety of their being. Just like someone else cannot see the totality of *your* life, and you wouldn't want *them* judging *you* based on your worst moments. We all just need to have a little more grace with each other, a little more understanding and compassion.

Billy Graham used to say, "It is the Holy Spirit's job to convict. It is God's job to judge. It is *my* job to love." The Holy Spirit *convicts* us, makes us think, "Man, I might have gotten this wrong." God *judges*, "Yeah, you *did* get this wrong." Our job is to love. And if we get this whole thing wrong, if we err in all

of this, may we err on the side of loving *too much* rather than not loving *enough*. Because while I have no idea what it will look like when we stand before God one day, I do not think that God will say to us, “Boy, you really loved people *too much*.” I think the bigger concern is God saying, “You were so set on your own ideas of what it means to be faithful and right, that you didn’t love people *enough*.”

This is not about *excusing* people’s actions or bad behavior. It’s about *understanding* it, so that maybe we can be a little more *compassionate* toward them. You don’t have to *agree* with someone to *love* them and be *compassionate* toward them. *None* of us is perfect. We’ve *all* got something about us that can be judged. That’s why Jesus tells us to take the log out of our own eye before we say anything about the speck in our neighbor’s eye. Because once we tend to *our own* sin and imperfection, we might have a little more understanding and compassion for *theirs*.

I think it comes down to what Jesus says at the end of this reading from Luke. “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Humility. That’s the key. Humbling ourselves. Recognizing that there are things about *us* that are imperfect. Recognizing that we are not God, we cannot see the totality of someone else’s life, and so we are in no position to judge them. It’s recognizing that we are all broken and imperfect and doing the best we can, and God loves us anyway. We are all in this together. Not one of us is *better* than the other, and can we find a way to be *okay* with that – to accept each other’s faults and to either accept or change our own.

You are *going* to judge others. Following Jesus is not about being *perfect*. It’s about being *faithful*. It’s about, when we *catch* ourselves doing it, can we *stop* ourselves and *humble* ourselves and say, “You know what? I’m not God. I don’t know what they are dealing with, what is going on in their life, and I’m not perfect either. God, be merciful to me, a sinner, so that I can be more merciful to *them*.” Because what our world needs right now is not more judgment. What our world needs right now is more humility

and understanding and compassion and mercy and love. *That* is what it means to follow Jesus; to be *that* kind of presence in the world and to leave the judgment to God.