

Judge and Jury? – Matt 7:1-6 (+ James 2:12-13, 4:11-12, 5:9)
10:30am on 21st Feb 10

Introduction

Good morning everyone

I expect that many of you are aware that on Friday, the world's number one golfer, Tiger Woods, made a tearful and frank apology for cheating on his wife: "I was unfaithful, I had affairs and I cheated. What I did was unacceptable." He went on to say: "I hurt my wife, my kids, my mother, my wife's family, my friends, my foundation and kids all around the world who admired me."

What do you make of his confession?

Do you think – fantastic, someone who has badly blundered in his personal life, is now genuinely trying to repair – as best he can – the damage and hurt he's caused.

Or do you think – hmmm, that's someone who's trying to rebuild his reputation so that he can rescue all those lucrative corporate sponsorships. It's really all about the money

Or are you not sure?

Most of us seem to love judging other people. We certainly do it a great deal of the time. Lots of us are world champions at people-watching and people-judging

But it's much more than that. We like to be the jury too! Not only do we like to preside over the court of inquisition but we like to act as the jurors too. All twelve of them!

The problem with this, as Jesus tells us at the start of Matthew 7, which as a reminder is on page 971 of our pew Bibles, is that wrongly judging others is a dangerous game. It harms us, it harms other people, and it harms our relationship with God.

This morning I'm going to talk about:

- Three key dangers of judging others
 - o No. 1: God will judge us the way we judge others
 - o No. 2: We can damage the church family
 - o No. 3: The hypocrisy of judging others
- The 'how-to guide' of judging others

Got that? Three key dangers of judging others, and the 'how-to guide' to doing it right

Danger No. 1: God will judge us the way we judge others (vv1-2)

So, firstly, the danger that God will judge us the way we judge others

The Greek word that's used for judge in these verses is *krinō*.

Krinō means "to distinguish" and thus "to decide"

It's about forming judgments and reaching conclusions about both things and people.

It's about being discerning instead of being judgmental.

Our problem is that we often get this the other way round: we're judgmental instead of being discerning. And Jesus says that there may be serious consequences to doing this.

Okay, so what's the difference between the two?

What's the difference between being judgmental and being discerning?

Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson went camping in some hills for the night. After they got their tent set up, both men fell sound asleep. Some hours later, Sherlock Holmes wakes Watson and says, "My good doctor look towards sky, what you see?" Watson replies, "I see millions of stars." "Indeed, so what does that tell you?" asked Sherlock Holmes. Watson thinks for a moment then says, "Astronomically speaking, it tells me there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Time-wise, it appears to be approximately a quarter past three in the morning. Theologically, it's evident the Lord is all-powerful and we are small and insignificant. What does it tell you, Holmes?" Sherlock is silent for a moment and then says, "Watson, you dunderhead! It means that someone's stolen our tent."

That's discernment! But when Sherlock called Watson a "dunderhead" that's being judgmental.

The crucial point to grasp is that God will use the measure by which we judge others, to measure us.

In chapter 2 of his epistle James says this:

¹² *Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom,*

¹³ *because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.*

Mercy triumphs over judgment!

The first danger is that God will judge us in the way that we judge others. After all, if we're not discerning and merciful towards others, then it's unreasonable to expect anything different from God, when it's our turn for judgment

Danger No. 2: We can damage the church family (vv1-2)

The second danger of judging others is that we can damage the church family.

We might not like to admit it but sadly here at Southover we're not exempt from having a judgmental attitude at times. And I'm not excluding myself from this.

We have a tendency to make unnecessarily negative statements about all sorts of things.

For example we make comments about our worship:

- We grumble about the music being too loud, too slow, too traditional, or too modern
- We complain about the length of services and of the sermons
- We mutter about the noise of children and others in church
- I've even heard complaints that the church is too full now!

Other areas of complaint include too much of a focus on youth, or men. And that we have a PCC and a leadership that only does what Steve wants to do.

I could go on but I'm sure that you've got the point.

Now I'm not saying that we should never criticise things at Southover. Indeed later on I'm going to suggest how we might lovingly be able to do just that.

And I don't want to overstate the case. Frankly, I suspect that by the standards of many churches we're in pretty good shape:

- I see a wonderful unity of purpose
- I see a great desire to grow as disciples together (BTW I hope that my confidence in this is borne out by a great attendance at the Discipleship course starting this week!)
- And only this week someone told me that love and care oozes out of Southover people's pores.

But I am saying that at present in my judgement some of us have got the balance wrong. For a church that has been consistently doing the reverse of most churches over the last 7 years or so – i.e. growing – we're too quick to make negative comments and too slow to give positive feedback and encouragement to those who are working their socks off to make it all happen.

Jesus knows the damage that a judgmental attitude can do to the health and unity of a church family. That's why he says these words in the middle of some of the most important teaching he ever gave.

So the first two dangers of judging others are: firstly, that God will judge us the way that we judge others; and secondly that we can damage the church family.

Danger No. 3: The hypocrisy of judging others (vv3-4)

The third danger of judging others is that of being hypocritical.

The Greek word for hypocrite came from the theatrical world. It was used for an actor performing behind a mask. It described a person acting in one way but being another.

So we're in an area in which self-awareness is important. As someone has warned dog-owners: "Know yourself: don't accept your dog's admiration as conclusive evidence that you are wonderful...."

In verses 3 to 5, we see Jesus thinking back to his days as a carpenter to come up with a wonderfully humorous and telling illustration. You can't see to remove a tiny speck of sawdust from someone's eye if you have a great plank of wood in your own. So it is with judging others. We pick on a tiny blemish in someone else's behaviour, and fail to see a far greater fault in ourselves.

I was shocked, confused, bewildered as I entered Heaven's door. Not by the beauty of it all, by the lights or its décor. But it was the people in heaven who made me splutter and gasp;

the thieves, the liars, the sinners, the drug takers. There was the lad who used to bully me back in my school days; next to him was my old neighbour, who'd never said anything nice. Matt, who I had always thought was destined for the other place, was sitting pretty on cloud nine, looking incredibly well. I nudged Jesus, "What the deal here? I'd love to hear your views on this. How on earth did all these sinners get up here? God must've made a mistake. And why's everyone so quiet, so still?" "Hush, child," said Jesus. "They're all in shock. No one thought they'd see you here."

Jesus deliberately paints a ridiculous scenario: like the equally impossible picture of a camel going through the eye of a needle (Matt 19:24). Its very absurdity grabs the attention and highlights the untenable position of the insincere critic – the individual who fails to apply the same standards to himself that he applies to others.

How do we really think that we're going to be able to help another person if we can't see them, or the situation, either clearly or objectively?

How do we really think that we'll be able to help if we're unaware of our own greater failings?

We're simply not in a proper position to do so.

How can we help someone to love others more, when we have less love than them?

How can we complain about poor music, when we haven't offered to play?

How can we criticise someone's decisions, when we don't have any better suggestions to make?

A caveat: Jesus is not saying that all judging is wrong

Now that we've looked at three key dangers of judging others, I need to take a brief detour to make something very clear: Jesus did not prohibit all judging of any kind.

This passage is sometimes used by people, including some well-meaning believers, to imply, or even confidently state, that we're not to judge, full-stop, end of sentence.

But it's important to realise that this isn't the case. Scripture makes it very clear that there are times when we have to judge:

- For example Jesus himself noted in John 7:24 that we are to "make a right judgment"
- 1 Cor. 5:9-13 talks about how we are to "judge those who are inside" the local church
- 1 John 4:1 says we are to "test the spirits"

Let's not make the mistake of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. We mustn't use this passage as an excuse to shirk our responsibility to judge, to discern, and to distinguish the difference between right and wrong.

The 'how-to guide' of judging others – (vv5-6)

Let's now look at the 'how-to guide' of judging others

Here's a quick question for you: How do you clean a crocodile's teeth? Answer: Very carefully!

This is exactly how we must go about exercising our responsibility to remove the speck from the eyes of our brothers and sisters: very carefully.

Firstly, we need to ask ourselves why it is that we so consistently seem to get it wrong. Why is it that we feel the need to criticise others so freely and in such judgmental ways – even when we know it's wrong to do so?

Well we do it because we can't help ourselves
We do it because of a fundamental lack of confidence in ourselves and our abilities
We do it because of our anxieties about ourselves.

We worry about so many things:
We worry about our looks
We worry about our status
We worry about what other people will think of us
We worry about our future

And all these worries and anxieties lead directly to our need to rank ourselves against other people
It's because we aren't confident in our own worth, that we feel the need to criticise others unfairly.
Because by criticising others, we can put them down below us

You see we all feel better when we're at the top table, when we're higher up
We all feel better when we're looking down at others, rather than looking up at others

The sad truth is that we can't help being critical of others. It's a human condition that's directly due to our fallen, sinful nature. Everyone is in the same boat. Everyone! And the problem is that we can't get out of it by ourselves. We need help.

But praise God, help is exactly what we've been given. As it says in John 3:16, God loves us so much that he provided the complete solution for us in the person of his son, Jesus Christ

When we fully realise that we're so valuable to God that he sent us his own son to die for us on that cross, it changes everything.

Jesus' death takes away the need for us to rank ourselves against others because it enables us to see our ultimate worth in the eyes of the only person who really matters – our creator

When we're in relationship with God
When he views us through the blood of Jesus
God sees us as beautiful and perfect – just as we were designed to be

Do you see that it's not until we're totally confident of our identity in Jesus that we're able to begin to tackle our faults? To begin to put our own house in order

So what does this mean for us today?

It means that before we do anything else, we must make sure that we have a right relationship with God

It means that before we judge others, we must make sure we have applied the same standards to ourselves – we must have removed that plank from our eye

It means that we should be known as those who recognise our own shortcomings, not as those who are blinded by them

It means that in preference to judging our brothers and sisters – we must serve them. After all they are accountable to God not to us.

It means that we should be known for our willingness to work to alleviate the troubles of others, not for adding to them by fault-finding criticism;

It means that we should be known for our practical help, not for a desire to pick holes in other people's work

So here are some practical suggestions

- Before you bash out that critical email to Steve Daughtery this week make sure that you've sent him a few positive ones first
- Instead of complaining that the coffee is cold or too weak, why not offer to add your name to the rota
- Before you make that critical observation about the music, consider whether it might not be better to say a big 'thank you' to all those who freely give their time to help you worship and to ask if there's anything you can do to help
- Before you're critical of a focus on youth and children's work, give thanks that we're the only Anglican church in Lewes that has any youth work and write an appreciative note to one of the leaders.

We know that we have a right relationship with God, when our desire to be judgmental towards others starts to fade and is replaced by a desire to love and serve them instead

Conclusion

So before I finish, let me recap what I've been saying this morning.

Jesus says that wrongly judging others is a dangerous game. It harms us, it harms our church community, and it harms our relationship with God.

This passage does not teach that judgments should never be made – Matthew 7:5 does speak of removing *"the speck from your brother's eye"*.

But before we consider judging other people, we must ensure that we have dealt with our own faults first by getting our relationship with God right

Finally when we're seeking to help another, we must exercise care to do only what would be appreciated and beneficial. The only justification for judging our brothers and sisters is as part of serving them!

I asked at the start what you thought of Tiger Woods' confession. For what it's worth I think he's being genuine but that he still has everything to prove. As he himself said "My real apology will come in my behaviour over time."

Trust has to be earned as well as given. This usually takes time. So it is with us and our judging of others. If being judgemental is a weakness of ours, we'll need time to demonstrate over time our commitment with God's help, to change our behaviour.

Let's remember that we will all have to face the Righteous Judge one day. So with that in mind, let's always judge others in the way that we want Jesus to judge us – with mercy and grace.

Prayer