

Modern-Day Proverbs Sermon Series
When You Point the Finger... – Matt. 7:1-5
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Would you consider yourself to be judgmental? I don't know anyone who self-identifies that way. That's not a desirable quality, is it? "You should meet my friend, Kory. He's so judgmental!" And no one likes to feel judged, either. Sadly, having two daughters, I'm quite used to it. If I'm wearing something that isn't aesthetically pleasing to them, I'll hear, "Where did you get THAT?" To which I respond, "What do you mean? This satin track suit still kinda fits!" No one likes to be on either side of judgmentalism.

But that's what we do each time we point our finger, which is the subject of today's modern-day proverb. For this sermon series, we're looking at sayings that probably should be in the Bible but aren't. Today's saying is "When you point the finger at someone else, three fingers are pointing back at you." If you don't believe me, try it! Point your finger at me. (Pause) Geez, not everyone the same time. I feel so judged!

But maybe that's how the world sees the church. You'd think because it was Jesus who said we shouldn't judge, we would take heed and go out of our way not to be judgmental. And yet, that is a primary way our culture defines the church. In an extensive survey of non-Christians, the Barna group found that 87% of them said the church was judgmental. We have become better known for what we oppose than what we stand for. If 87% of non-Christians think the church is judgmental, then almost nine out of ten non-church goers you meet assume you are judging them.

And, to be fair, you are. Judging other people is a part of our human nature. It's in our DNA to draw conclusions about a person based on what we know about them. And the more information we gain about them, the more we judge them. We form opinions on their looks, how they dress, their family, where they live, what they do for work.

But there's a difference between judging and being judgmental. I'd articulate the difference this way: judging is drawing conclusions and forming opinions about someone based on the information you have. "That person is tall, I bet he is a basketball player." Being judgmental is drawing conclusions and forming opinions about someone that criticizes or condemns them. "That person looks Middle Eastern, I bet they are dangerous."

Of course, we Christians don't call it judgmentalism; we call it "telling the truth in love," which we then use as a license to point out the sinful speck in the other person's eye. A great example of this is the phrase, "Hate the sin, love the sinner," which, by the way, is not in the Bible. It might sound like a harmless, grace-filled statement on the surface, but it really carries with it an air of judgment. This phrase is often applied to what is considered deviant behavior, but I've never heard anyone say, "I love her but I hate her greed" or "I love him but I hate his entitlement." Christians think spraying a little love on their judgment will make it smell better, but apparently 87% of non-Christians still smell the stink.

Apparently, followers of God have a rich tradition of finger-pointing, going all the way back to the Hebrew bible. In our passage from Isaiah today, the Israelites complain that God isn't blessing them and God says, "I'm not going to bless you until you stop acting like fools." God spells it out for them: "If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday."

“If you do away with the finger pointing...” It’s as if we’re God’s little deputies, helpfully pointing out all the people who’ve fallen down around us. “Right there, God! That’s the one who wronged me. That’s the one who believes the wrong thing. That’s the one who loves the wrong people. Get ‘em!” You know Facebook has a “thumbs up” icon you can post if you like something? They need a “finger-pointing” icon when you want to blame someone else. I have a feeling it would get a lot more use.

Of course, this wasn’t even new behavior for the Israelites. It goes all the way back to Genesis, when God asked Adam, “Have you eaten from that tree that I told you not to eat from?” And Adam said, “Uh...she made me do it!” And God said to Eve, “What have you done?” And Eve said, “Uh...the serpent made me do it!” And ever since then, we fallen humans have perfected the art of finger-pointing.

Do you realize that in this passage, Isaiah puts pointing the finger on par with letting people starve? Is finger-pointing really that sinful? Let’s see...doesn’t every war start with someone pointing the finger? Doesn’t every family feud begin with someone pointing the finger? And the irony is the more we point the finger at others, the more we judge, the less able we are to see our own complicity in the situation, the log in our eye.

You might be surprised to know that Jesus did very little judging himself but had a lot to say about judging others. Our passage today about the logs in our eyes is a good one. So is the story where he says to a group of people ready to stone an adulteress woman, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” How do you hate the sin and love the sinner in that situation? “We love you, Gertrude, so just remember that as we’re hurtling these boulders at you.” Jesus was surrounded by sinners, he never judged them.

So, what did Jesus do with sinners? He ate with them. Partied with them. Spent time with them. He didn’t act like they were sinners. He didn’t point a finger at them. They were his friends. People with names. Defined as beloved children of God, not defined by their sins. The only people he judges are those who think they’ve got all their stuff together. He judges the righteous for being self-righteous and the religious for putting the law above grace, spewing hate speech about the speck in someone else’s eye while ignoring the log in their own.

The point Jesus makes here is that we are all guilty of the sin of judgmentalism, and that our judgmentalism isn’t truly based on the Bible, but on our own desire to feel superior to someone. One of the ways we lift ourselves up is by putting someone else down, and when we do that, when our pride takes over, we are guilty of judging. We all have that relative, right? The one who can’t quite get their lives together, who gets spoken about in hushed tones at the family reunion, the one who makes everyone else’s life difficult. And, if we admit it, there’s a part of us that feels good about ourselves because at least we’re not like them. More often than not, our judgmentalism is not about helping to redeem the other person but about making ourselves feel better.

And yet, by doing that, we’re committing our own sin. Paul says it this way in Romans, addressing a group of people who were criticizing others for their behavior: “Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.” You may be pointing at the other person, but three fingers are pointing back at you.

We also have to own our own sinfulness, even if we find our sins the more acceptable kind. We may not be really bad sinners like murderers or adulterers, but, as Paul reminds us, we have all fallen short of God’s glory. C.S. Lewis says it this way: “There’s someone I love, although I don’t approve of what he does. There is someone I accept, although some of his

thoughts and actions are disappointing. There's someone I forgive, even though he hurts the people I love the most. That someone is me."

For those reason, we deserve judgment. And we have gotten it, because our God is a judging God. That's one of God's primary roles. God called us to be God's people, to act a certain way, to live a certain way, and every single one of us has fallen short of that. There are consequences for disobedience, so we have to be judged. We have, and we have been found innocent. Wait, what? What kind of "Law and Order" twist is this? Because of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, all of us have been found "not guilty" of the very sins that condemn us to punishment. Christ's death on the cross has set us free from that judgment and replaced it with God's grace. There are no divine fingers pointing at us.

Why, then, is the church not known for its grace? Why aren't 87% of non-Christians saying the church is too gracious instead of too judgmental? Because too many Christians still believe that it's better to shame someone than to love them. Shaming them allows me to stand above them, but loving them requires me to get down in their mess with them, to eat with them, to party with them, to spend time with them. It's a lot easier to judge a single mom for her choices than to help her child with his homework or buy her groceries. It's so much easier to shout at someone, "Stop doing that!" than it is to show them what God's love and grace looks like in real life.

Will Rogers noted that before a Native American would criticize another person he would walk all the way around him. He would look carefully to see what the view was from that person's perspective before condemning him. I want you think about someone, or a group of people, whom you are most tempted to judge. It could be based on their looks, their lifestyles, their beliefs, their behaviors. Who is that for you? Now, what would it mean for you to walk all the way around them, to take the log out of your own eye and see things from their perspective?

Here's my hope for us. I hope we can become known for being too gracious. Granted, we might bet to Heaven and God might say, "You know, the folks at Crestwood went too far. They loved people too much. Y'all should have been more judgmental." I guess we'll have to take that chance. Because this world is not going to be made better by pointing more fingerse. But it could be made better by exercising more grace.

Gandhi is quoted as saying, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ." If you really want to point the finger at someone, if you really want to judge someone's sin, start with your own, the log in your eye. And then, once you've stopped sinning, you can start judging others. But until then, let's love one another. After all, that is so like Christ.