

Logs and Specks

^{NRS} **Luke 6:37** "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven;³⁸ give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."³⁹ He also told them a parable: "Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?⁴⁰ A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher.⁴¹ Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?⁴² Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

Logs and Specks

Henry David Thoreau said of the New Testament that people "favor it outwardly . . . defend it with bigotry . . . and (yet) I know of no book that has so few readers." (*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, p 80) Most of us favor the Bible outwardly. We buy copies of it, The Bible is a best selling book. We may even have multiple copies. I come from a pretty congenial family. Most of the time my aunts and uncles and cousins all got along pretty well. But there was quite a bit of tension in the family when my grandfather died. The family Bible was supposed to go to my Dad, but one of his sisters kept it because Dad was working overseas and she was afraid that it would be lost. Outwardly, she placed high value on the Bible, but it wasn't because she wanted to read it. It was because it had the family tree recorded in it and it had sentimental value. People have Bibles for lots of reasons, but a lot of times they don't have them so that they can read them.

As mentioned last week, people may fail to read their Bible because they find it hard to understand, or, because long genealogies or ancient history bore them, or, because what they find just doesn't seem relevant to our modern technical and virtual age. And sometimes, we can be slow to study the Bible because we don't want to be reminded about what scripture says. We find the lessons too challenging for comfort. Today we continue looking at some of the challenging teachings of Jesus in his Sermon on the Plain.

Some of the passages in the gospels are stories told from beginning to end. Other passages are collections of teachings of Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain are examples of collections of the teachings of Jesus. This is fairly apparent when you know that these few verses in Luke are found scattered across three separate chapters in Matthew. (Matt. 7:1-5, 15:14, 10:24-25)

The last line of the previous text is "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. [Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.] Today's text picks up with judgment and condemning. Mercy tempers judgment, both in the way you are judged and in the way we treat each other. In the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, we pray that we will be forgiven in the same way that we have forgiven other people. Actually, that can be a pretty scary thought! Most of us often just glide through the Lord's Prayer, reciting the familiar phrases without giving them much consideration. We find the ancient words just falling off our tongues and the old rhythms are comfortable and comforting. Perhaps, when we give it a bit of thought, we feel pretty good about ourselves, we don't need much forgiving, and so we needn't strain ourselves to do much forgiving. Or perhaps, we just hope that we can rely on God being more merciful with us than we are with others.

Many of us aren't comfortable in a kingdom where parties are given for prodigals and where tax collectors and sinners are welcome at the table. People should get what they deserve - and those who don't have much probably screwed up, and they're in the circumstances that they brought on themselves. That's how we tend to view things. So when we think about the prodigal son, we think

about how penitent he was and how he was forgiven. But that isn't the way the story goes. The father forgave his son and welcomed him home before the son was able to speak a single word. Jesus makes clear statements here in Luke. Do not judge others. Do not condemn. Does God's gracious and forgiving treatment of others makes us feel like he's left the job of judging undone and therefore we need to take care of it?

By the same token, this text doesn't excuse us from the necessity of exercising good judgment. We constantly need to be making judgments, to make discriminating moral decisions, to have a sense of right and wrong and justice, to be able to spot moral compromises and oppression. But we aren't to condemn others for their faults and failures. Sometimes we speak the truth in love with too much enthusiasm. But more about that in a moment.

[give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.] Two negatives – do not judge, do not condemn, are followed by two positives – forgive, give. This isn't just about the last judgment. It's about how to live life in God's kingdom here and now. Those who are merciful, non-judgmental, and generous with others are generally treated in the same way by others. And Jesus uses this illustration about measuring grain generously. The cup isn't just filled full, but it's also shaken so that it will settle and more can be added to the cup and it can be filled to overflowing.

The reference to a lap here is kind of odd. Some translations use the word bosom instead of lap. Remember that people wore loose robes in those days. They might also wear a belt of some sort. The word used here lap refers to the large pocket you could make by pulling up your robe a bit and forming a sort of pocket by having the extra cloth hang over your belt. You could put quite a bit in a pocket formed that way.

This text puts the emphasis on giving instead of getting. Rather than focusing on "What's in it for me?" - the question becomes, "What can I do to be of service? How can I be generous?" I recently read a story about a man who was quite wealthy and he was known in his city for being a generous philanthropist. After many years, his business took a terrible turn and he lost his business, and his house, and everything he owned. He came to live in a small apartment, working at a modest salary in his son's tiny business. His son said, "It must be terrible to have lost everything and to have given away so much money. You must regret having given so much away" The old man replied, "I wish I had given away more, because that's the only thing of value that I have."

The Dead Sea is a good example of what happens when we only take in but never give out. The Jordan River flows into the lowest place on earth, the Dead Sea. Water has flowed in for eons, but no water flows out to form marshes or water fields or irrigate crops. It all comes in and nothing flows out - and the Dead Sea is properly named. It is dead. It's so salty that nothing lives in it. We're the same. If all we do is get, then we die emotionally and spiritually. Winston Churchill was correct when he said, "We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give."

[He also told them a parable: "Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?] Jesus goes on to say, in effect, "See here. Look at what I'm telling you." Jesus' ministry is concerned with blindness – both literal and metaphorical. He begins his ministry announcing recovery of sight for the blind (4:18) and he treats those who are blind (7:21-22, 18:35-43, 14:13, 21). But his ministry wasn't just about curing people who were blind and couldn't see. Jesus was also saying, "Open your eyes! I'm trying to show you the kingdom of God. But you've got to be willing to look!" That's what we pray for every Sunday - illumination! To be able to see!

Unfortunately, sometimes we don't know because we don't want to know or don't choose to know. We're governed by motives that are selfish and short - and we don't want to be disturbed by long-range consequences. In effect, we declare "I'm saved!" and close our Bibles. That's why so many people don't know any more than what they learned in Sunday School in the fifth grade. They're still trying to get by on spiritual milk and Pablum. We might call them Gerber Christians because they aren't chewing on the meat of the scriptures. God is calling them to be nourished, grow stronger, and

live lives of meaning and service, but they're still barely able to crawl and they sit around sucking their thumbs instead of studying and growing. If they engage in church at all, they pick a place where they aren't challenged and stretched. Which leads us to the next point that Jesus makes.

[A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher.] Jesus has said don't choose a teacher who is blind, one who is badly limited in his or her own knowledge or study. Not only may that lead you off into a dead end of some sort, but a student is limited by how much the teacher knows. His point isn't that flaws disqualify the teacher, but blindness to one's flaws or unwillingness to be self-critical and honest with oneself are serious faults in a teacher.

I've noticed that there seems to be a general attitude in some circles that opinions are as important as facts or wisdom. News programs are encouraging people to email their opinions on various issues. Opinion polls are reported as if public opinion determined the right or wrong, the wisdom or foolishness of a situation. If an opinion poll were the way to determine the wise or right course, women would still be unable to vote, minorities would still be slaves, and there would never have been warning labels on cigarettes. I recently heard a speaker rather proudly proclaim that his training was in an unrelated field, he hadn't learned the history and background for his topic, but his opinions were published in a column in an area newspaper. He was uninformed, unqualified, and regularly published.

[Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴² Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye?] The concluding thought in this collection of Jesus' teachings ties in well with the themes of humility, not being judgmental or condemning but being generous and eager to learn. Jesus warns us all against being more eager to improve others than we are to improve ourselves. Here's one of the spots where Jesus uses a bit of humor, some exaggeration and an obviously silly example in order to make a point. By talking about logs and specks in people's eyes, he gives us a vivid picture that makes us remember the point. It's difficult to see ourselves objectively or to see ourselves as others see us. It requires humility, one of the seldom-desired virtues. But, without self-criticism, it's easy to slip into moral superiority or self-righteousness. It's easier to focus on someone else's faults than it is to look at ourselves. And there's always the temptation to make ourselves look better by making others look worse. Do you catch yourself saying in the heat of an argument, "Well, at least I don't do such-and-such like you do!"

[You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.] Notice the word hypocrite here. The term hypocrite originally referred to an actor, one who played a role. How is Jesus using it, here? It means more than self-conscious pretense. It means more than two-faced conduct where somebody acts one way in public and another way in private. The Pharisees acted in a moral way in both public and private. But Jesus called them hypocrites because they failed to see that they were sinners. Without humility, without self-examination, without continual learning and living of the Way where Christ leads, we can fail to see our own short-comings, our own wandering off in the wrong direction, our own sin - and be hypocrites just as those Pharisees were: self-centered, self-satisfied, and self-righteous.

Jesus calls us not only to hear, but to believe - not only believe, but to trust - not only to trust, but to grow and be changed. The path of Christ that the early church called The Way is an active faith that changes what we believe, who we trust, and what we do.

Amen