

“Jesus’ Teaching about Not Condemning and the Speck and the Log”

Luke 6:36-42; Genesis 37:1-36; 50:15-21

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Jesus says in the Gospel reading today: “Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned” (Luke 6:37). He goes on to say “forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. . . . For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you” (Luke 6:37-38 ESV). Then Jesus says, “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye, when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye?’” (Luke 6:41-42). We wrestle with this challenging teaching from our Lord today. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

As we dive into this, the first thing we need to do is take a look at the context. In addition to that, there is another preliminary thing we need to address. Then we will look to the story of Joseph and his brothers to illustrate what Jesus is saying.

To get the context, we need to back up a little in Luke chapter 6. When we do that, we hear Jesus saying this: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” Then skipping a little. “And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them. If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.” Skipping some more: “[F]or [the Most High] is kind to the ungrateful and evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:27-28, 31-32, 35b-36 ESV).

Those words suggest that Jesus is concerned about the reactions we could have when we think that someone has wronged us. It is as the Apostle Paul says, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. . . . Repay no one evil for evil . . . Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God” (Romans. 12:14, 17, 19 ESV). These words would not make sense unless there was someone who did some persecuting, who did evil, whom one thought deserved vengeance.

So, when it comes to Jesus saying, “Judge not, and you will not be judged,” we can summarize the context as one in which a person thinks or maybe really has been injured by the bad conduct of somebody else in some way. When we see Jesus’ words in such a context, we see that He is addressing a tendency the corrupted sinful nature has to judge and condemn another with all of the resources of the law, with all the might of righteous indignation and the feeling of being absolutely justified, when someone has wronged one, or someone one loves. When that wrong occurs, our sinful human nature often rises up in the full fury of the law and uses it to judge and condemn. Jesus speaks the words about judging not and condemning not and the speck and the log in relation to this tendency. This is affirmed when we also hear Jesus say: “Forgive, and you will be forgiven; As you want others to do to you, do so to them. The same measure you use, God will apply to you.”

These sayings of Jesus speak of true justice, fairness. The trouble is that our corrupted human nature does not naturally have true justice. When the corrupted human nature gets injured, it tends to overreact out of some sense of justice and uses the law to justify its vengeance-seeking fury: “See how that person deserves it.” But the overreaction is not true justice. So Jesus instructs us to be on guard against the tendency of our corrupted sinful nature

and use Him to fight against it and do good and be patient.

Having talked about the context, there is another preliminary thing that needs to be said. This involves a misapplication of Jesus' words. Have you ever heard someone say this: "God doesn't judge anybody; when the church says something is wrong, it is just man's judgment." I have heard such arguments. And people point to Jesus' words here about not judging and not condemning to support them. "See," they might say, "Jesus tells the church not to judge and condemn. Therefore, God does not judge anyone and when the church teaches that something is wrong it is not following Jesus, who would never condemn anyone either."

But is it true that God does not judge anyone? No it isn't. This teaching has developed out of the secularism of our day and the view that the individual is a law unto himself or herself. We could point to many passages of Scripture that say differently. Here is one from the Apostle Paul: "For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law." And then he adds: "For there is no partiality with God" (Romans 2:11-12 ESV). And then the Apostle says, "We have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin" (Rom 3:9). The issue then becomes whether a person is humble toward God, agrees with God's judgement against sin under His law, and then believes in the Gospel of forgiveness in Christ that He offers, as the way of escape from God's judgment against sin and the opening up of new life.

In addition to this, we also need to speak of office. What I mean by this is a position in society that has the duty, the charge, the authority, and the responsibility from God of judging bad conduct, and praising good conduct, without partiality. This involves the responsibility and authorization to teach the right doctrine and condemn false doctrine, teach good conduct and condemn bad conduct, while also proclaiming the Gospel. God has instituted such offices in human society and in the church.

For this, let's listen to Luther for a moment. In a sermon he preached on the Gospel reading today, he said this: "We must make a distinction however, for it is vastly different when a person punishes [bad conduct] who has the office to punish and when one punishes who has not this office. An office . . . is ordained to punish sin; not to tolerate wrong, but protect [what is] right. . . . [Otherwise], the country would be full of rogues, and the world become a mere den of murderers" (Martin Luther, *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed and trans. John Nicholas Lenker and others, Vol. 2.1-2, (Baker Books, 2000), p. 119).

Parents, by the way, have the authority to teach and praise good conduct and condemn bad conduct, as do teachers, when they are teaching the truth, and other office holders in human society and in the church.

So, then it is not true that God does not judge anybody and what is false teaching and bad or inappropriate conduct. He has given the office of His word and truth to teach what is true and right and judge as false what is contrary to God's word and truth. If this were not true, then God would be de-throned as God and His word would be silenced, but that cannot be. God will always remain God and speak through His word and humanity will always remain accountable to Him and will be taught and judged according to God's word.

So when Jesus is talking about judging not, condemning not he is talking to us in our personal capacity in the context of someone having done something bad to us, whether perceived or objectively wrong. A powerful way Jesus talks to us about this has to do with the speck and the log. Let's turn to this by looking at the story of Joseph and his brothers. What I am about to say comes from Genesis chapter 37.

Joseph was 17 years old. He was in the fields with ten of his brothers and brought a bad

report about them to Jacob, their father (Gen. 37:2). In other words, Joseph told on them. Jacob also loved Joseph more than his other sons. If this was a fault, it was the fault of Jacob, not Joseph. Jacob made a coat of many colors for Joseph (Gen. 37:3). That must mean it was a beautiful coat, probably expensive, and probably a coat of honor. Let's call these things with respect to Joseph a speck. Yet, Joseph's brothers hated him (Gen. 37:4). There is a log.

Joseph had a couple of dreams. In one dream, Joseph and his brothers were binding sheaves of grain while harvesting in the fields. Joseph's sheaf stood upright. The sheaves representing Joseph's brothers bowed down to Joseph's sheaf (Gen. 37:5-8). This suggested to the brothers that Joseph was telling them that his brothers were going to bow down to him and be ruled by him.

This dream was a speck, because it was a dream, and they could have just dismissed the young and immature Joseph as just being young and immature. But no. They hated Joseph even more (Gen. 37:8). That is surely a log.

The other dream was about the sun, and moon, and twelve stars. The sun, and the moon, and eleven of the stars were bowing down to Joseph's star. Joseph told this dream to his brothers. Now the brothers told on Joseph. They told Jacob, their father, about this dream (Gen. 37:9-10).

Wait a minute. Were they not angry at Joseph for telling on them at first? Now they tell on Joseph. But they think that their telling on Joseph is justified while it was not justified for Joseph to tell on them. Hum. What would Jesus say about this in truth. Is this justice? No: "Hypocrites" (Luke 6:31, 42).

Jacob rebuked Joseph as was the authority of his office as parent to do (Gen. 37:10). He did this in case Joseph was truly speaking out of sinful pride and arrogance. Yet, Jacob also kept Joseph's dream in mind, just in case it was from God.

Here again is the speck. Yet, Joseph's brothers added jealousy to hatred. This is the log.

So what did Joseph's brothers do? One day Joseph came to them when they were in the field with the flocks and herds. They conspired to kill Joseph: a log indeed. So they threw him into a cistern that had no water. It was such that Joseph could not climb out of it. They were conspiring to kill him. Reuben, the oldest, talked them out of killing Joseph (Gen. 37:18-24).

Joseph cried out to them in distress and pleaded with them to be merciful to him. You can easily imagine the scene, and Joseph's distress (Gen. 42:21).

But they would not listen. They had no mercy. They felt so justified in what they were doing: using the law to justify their hatred and their actions. Joseph had been so bad to them, they thought.

Reuben had to go off somewhere in relation to the business regarding the flocks. As he was away, the other brothers were debating what to do with Joseph. Judah spoke up. "Let us not kill him and cover it up. What profit would there be in that? Let's sell him to the Ishmaelites" (Gen. 37:27).

And here is a rather twisted piece of logic from Judah. Being in that kind of state of mind and spirit tends to twist logic and truth. "Let not our hand be upon him [to kill him] for he is our brother, our own flesh" (Gen. 37:27). So they sold their brother, their own flesh, into slavery to some Midianite traders who were passing by in the area. They sold their brother, their own flesh, for 20 shekels of silver, about 11 grams worth. The Midianite traders took Joseph to Egypt and sold him there as a slave (Gen. 37:25-28). It would not take much imagination to appreciate Joseph's anguish, despair, and terror. Should not they have had patience and mercy on their own brother, their own flesh?

When Reuben returned, he was dismayed and horrified because Joseph was gone. As the

oldest brother, the oldest son of Jacob, he felt some responsibility for Joseph, his younger brother. So he was dismayed. What was he going to tell Jacob, his father, when he had to face him?

They killed a goat and dipped Joseph's beautiful, many-colored coat in it. They sent it to Jacob to ask him to verify that it was Joseph's coat. Of course, Joseph immediately knew that it was. Then he immediately concluded that Joseph had been killed by a bear, or lion, or wolf and "torn to pieces" (Gen. 37:31-33).

So Joseph's brothers lied to their father and brought great grief and horror to his heart. This is a log indeed, and what destruction it worked. Whatever Joseph did to them was a speck. Their hatred and jealousy and what they did to Joseph, was a log, a very large log indeed.

What would Joseph do when he saw his brothers again? If there was any objective justification to kill in this story, it was on Joseph's side. Yet, to sum up the story, he forgave his brothers in the patience of faith in God: "Am I in the place of God? You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:19).

So Jesus and the Scripture teach us that the corrupted sinful nature does not have God's justice as natural to it. He teaches us this so that we can be on guard against it in our personal capacities, and even in our official capacities, wherein the sinful nature can tempt one to go too far. But then He also teaches us a higher way, another way, which is His way, in which He is the example, the redeemer, and the power.

He is the example, because when He was reviled, He did not revile in return. When they were doing great evil to Him in nailing Him to the cross, He said: "Father forgive them" (Luke 23:34). He is the power of not repaying evil with evil and leaving it to the wrath of God in the patience of faith.

Jesus is the redeemer because In His death, He gave Himself for those who were His enemies, for all of us, for we all have sinned and thus made ourselves Christ's enemies. And He was not vindicating His rights against us. Rather, by His sacrifice He was working for us something much more important; our forgiveness, obtaining peace. In obtaining our forgiveness, in not vindicating his rights, He was working for us the way we could live with Him and have fellowship with Him and God in Christian love, being redeemed from the injustice of our corrupted sinful nature.

And so He also is the power because He Himself is the source of bringing into practice in our lives this not judging and not condemning, this forgiving, and doing good to those who we think have hurt us. His love for us by which each of us hopes to be saved is also Jesus' power of love to do good to others and wait on God in faith, when others have injured us, or we think they have.

This should lead to humility and repentance and openness and submission to the word of God. When it does, there will be peace, in the prince of peace, who is our redemption with the Father, and has covered all of our sin. He lives for you to be your life. Amen.