DO NOT JUDGE

Matthew 7:1-12

Key Verse:7:1 “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.”

There is a certain tradition in the inauguration ceremony of the president of the United States. When a newly elected president takes the presidential pledge before a federal judge and the people, he puts his hand on the Bible. He pledges before God and the people to be responsible for carrying out his duty as president. Before the ceremony the president choose a Bible verse for his presidential motto. George Washington chose Genesis 49:22-25. Do you know what Bible verse Abraham Lincoln chose for himself? Surprisingly, it was Matthew 7:1, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.” There is a hidden story why he chose this verse. Mr. Lincoln was a sarcastic writer and lawyer before he became a president. One day he wrote a very sarcastic article about his opponent named James Shields, who became furious. James challenged Abraham to a dual with swords. Abraham was not a skillful soldier. He was gripped with the fear of death. He deeply regretted his cynical writing about James. So he narrowly escaped from the deadly dual through a mediator. Since then it was told that Mr. Lincoln did not judge or write a disparaging articles about others. Matthew 7:1 became his life motto even after he became a president.

Today Jesus teaches us the same verse given to Mr. Lincoln not through a deadly dual, but through the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus also teaches us how to seek God and to receive his help through persistent prayer.

First, Do not judge, or you too will be judged. (1,2) Let us read verse 1. “***Do not judge, or you too will be judged***.” What does the word ‘judge’ mean? The word ‘judge’ in Greek is *krínō*, which means ‘judge’, ‘condemn’, and ‘discern’. Greeks use the word ‘*krínō*’ in several different ways, such as ‘pick out by separating’, ‘decide between right and wrong’, ‘bring to the law, ‘to rule’, ‘to contend’, and so on. Why do people judge others? It is because they make decisions of right or wrong according to capabilities such as reason, knowledge, experience, and so on. They think that they are right and others are wrong. God gave men inborn nature to discern what is right from what is wrong. Men want to imitate God, who is righteous and just. But people judge others in order to defend their unrighteousness, or to glorify their righteousness by condemning others. We call this ‘self-righteousness’. Judging others according to self-righteousness breaks relationships and damages the Christian community.

Jews believe that God has two measures, “mercy’ and ‘justice.’ We measure others with justice, not with mercy. We are merciful to our weaknesses and judgmental towards others. In other words, we are generous with our own sins and strict toward others. Jesus warns against this hypocritical judgment in this passage.

Why should we not judge others? There are three reasons. First of all, we too will be judged when we judge others. Look at verses 1 and 2, “***Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.***” When you judge others, you should not expect that they will appreciate your judgment. Nine times out of ten, maybe always, they will judge you in the same way you judge them. They keep quiet and wait for the chance for revenge. Senseless judgment causes huge fights. The presidential races have started in this country. All candidates are busy advertising themselves to the maximum degree. They are not hesitant to criticize other candidates by exposing their weaknesses and scandals. It is not difficult to see muddy dog-eat-dog fights in all media. We must not judge others in order not to be judged.

Second of all, God is the only judge. There is no one righteous, not even one. Our God is the only one who is perfect, good, righteous, and just. God is the only one who has the right and authority to judge us. When we judge others, we take God’s place. We don’t have this right. James 4:12 says, “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you - who are you to judge your neighbor?” When the Israelites rebelled against Moses, he did not fight back against them. He brought them to God in prayer. Moses believed that God is the Judge who would deal with his rebellious people.

Third, we must not judge others because our judgment may be wrong. People judge others according to their own knowledge, experience, and moral standard. They also judge others based on indirect resources such as rumors, news, articles, and so on. Their judgments often turn out to be wrong. Recently, we have studied the book of Job through our Daily Bread. Job’s three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, heard about Job’s suffering and visited him to comfort him. They intended to sympathize with Job, but ended up accusing him, saying that he was guilty before God. They said that Job suffered much because of his own sin. These three friends judged Job based on their own knowledge and understanding, but they did not know God’s divine plan behind Job’s suffering. God tested Job’s faith and his integrity. Job passed God’s test and was blessed even more than before. The judgment of Job’s three friends was wrong. Like Job’s friends we also make the same mistakes because of our misjudgment and misunderstanding. Is it not better, then, for us to keep quiet and ignore when others are doing wrong?

First, take the plank out of your own eye. (3-6) In these verses Jesus rebukes the hypocritical Pharisees to repent, they who were sitting on the seat of judgment. Look at verses 3-5. “***Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye***.” Jesus didn’t say that we should not remove the sawdust from other’s eyes. But he said that we must take the plank out of our own eye first and then remove the sawdust from other’s eyes. Here, the sawdust symbolizes other’s wrongdoings or faults, whereas the plank symbolizes our own wrongdoings or faults. To our eyes, others’ wrongdoings look as big as planks while our own look as small as sawdust. But Jesus said that the opposite is true. We don’t realize how big our sins are before God. We easily forget what terrible sinners we used to be before we received God’s mercy. In the past, Paul arrested Christians and persecuted them because of his ignorance and self-righteousness. After he met the Risen Christ, he found that he was wrong. He received God’s forgiving love and experienced his mercy. Paul saw the people of the world with the eyes of God’s mercy and worked hard by God’s grace. (1 Cor 15:10) When he remembered God’s grace, he became humble. He confessed, “…Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst.” (1Ti 1:15)

Who are mature Christians? They are those who acknowledge their weaknesses first before others, and humble themselves in seeking God’s mercy. They seek God’s mercy before they seek God’s justice. James 2:13 says, “Because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.”

Look at verse 6. “***Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces***.” In this verse Jesus teaches us to have discerning heart. ‘Do not judge’ does not mean to accept without discretion all kinds of people with all kinds of ideas. Even though we don’t judge others, we need a discerning heart to help others spiritually, mentally and emotionally. But we must be very careful and prayerful when we do so. Otherwise, we may face unexpected responses or negative results. Here, ‘what is sacred’ and ‘pearls’ indicate the gospel and the word of God. They are treasures. Pigs and dogs are those who despise the word of God and the gospel. They do not appreciate the value of the treasures. It is difficult for us to have discerning heart. We are not sure of where the boundary is between judging and discerning. How did Jesus answer this question?

Third, ask, seek, and knock (7-12) Look at verses 7 and 8. “***Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.***” These verses are popular, even with unbelievers. Some use these as mottos for positive attitude. Connecting to the previous context, Jesus teaches his disciples to ask for God’s wisdom through prayer. This prayer requires sincerity and persistence. There is also a progression in this prayer. Jesus teaches us to ask, seek, and knock. Jesus does not want us to give up, but to continue in prayer until God answers our prayer. Jesus teaches us to pray not only with words from the mouth but also in action and deeds. I quote a beautiful story from Pastor Ron Ward’s message about wisdom through persistent prayer. “One rich Christian wanted to help a needy brother by giving him money. In his heart, he thought, "As a man, you should take care of your family. But you are not doing so because you are deficient." When he tried to help him with this mindset, the needy brother felt humiliated and refused, even though he really needed the help. This soured their relationship. When the rich Christian prayed about this he received God's wisdom how to help him. First, he realized what his own problem was. He found himself a terrible sinner who was proud of his wealth. Then he began to see how precious others are and to appreciate and respect his needy brother from his heart. So he tried again, humbly asking his needy brother to allow him to share his material prosperity. Then the needy brother gladly accepted his help and their relationship began to blossom. This attitude in helping others applies not only to material help, but also to spiritual help, intellectual help, emotional help, marital counseling, and any kinds of help.”

In this story we learn from the rich Christian about his humility, sincerity, and integrity in helping others. He did his best to build up a good relationship with his poor brother. He approached him with respect and compassion. It worked. Let us pray to God for his wisdom to discern. Let us also seek and find ways to help others spiritually, mentally, and materially. King Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings a day at Gibeon. This pleased the Lord. The Lord appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream and said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.” (1 Ki 3:5) Solomon answered, “I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties…So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong…” (1Ki 3:7-9) His answer pleased the Lord. The Lord God gave him not only wisdom and discerning heart but also great wealth and honor.

In verses 9-11 Jesus teaches us about God the Father, to whom we pray. Look at verses 9-11. “***Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!***” Here Jesus compares the Heavenly Father to our human father. Our human father, even though he is not good, knows how to give good things to his children. No father gives stones to his children who ask for bagels. No father gives scorpions to his children who seek fish sticks. They know how to provide good things for their children. How much more our Heavenly Father, who loved us and sent his One and Only Son for our sins, gives his best gifts to his children! In Luke’s gospel, Jesus describes God’s best gifts as the Holy Spirit. Luke 11:13 says, “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

We need the Holy Spirit in doing the work of God. We need the Holy Spirit when we help others. We need words and wisdom from above when we serve the Lord. Jesus called the Holy Spirit, “Another Counselor,”(Jn 14:26) and “the Spirit of truth.” (Jn 15:26) When we ask and seek the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit will counsel us, comfort us, defend us, and help us. The Holy Spirit teaches us what to say and how to answer. In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul said that the Holy Spirit helps in our weakness and intercedes for us when we do not know what we ought to pray for. (Rom 8:26,27) The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, eventually leads us to the truth, who is Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit encourages us and helps us to grow in the image of Jesus Christ and bear all kinds of the fruits of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This is the reason why Jesus asked his disciples to seek the Holy Spirit as the best gifts.

Look at verse 12. “***So in everything, do to others what you would have them to do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets***.” In this verse Jesus teaches his disciples about positive action in order to grow into mature Christians. People wait until others initiate apology. But reconciliation requires mutual effort. Both need sincere and humble attitudes toward reconciliation. Buddha taught his disciples to avoid their enemies. But Jesus teaches his disciples more positive and active actions; to go and reconcile. We call the Law and the Prophets the ‘Golden Rule.” If this Golden Rule is not obeyed, it becomes useless. Jesus wants to remind us of all his teachings and to put them into practice.

In conclusion Jesus teaches us not to judge others, but to pray for them with compassion and respect. We need the help of the Holy Spirit in building up relationships and Christian community. Above all, we need the self-realization to see ourselves as sinners, remember God’s grace and see others with the eyes of mercy. Amen.