

MATT 7.1-5: DON'T JUDGE OTHERS

[Chelmsford 10 June 2012]

RED LETTER WORDS

Red Letter Words – that's the title I have given to a new series of sermons I intend to preach over the next two or so months. The red letter words in question are the words of Jesus, which in some Bibles are printed in red.

A year last January we had a visit from Tony Campolo, the distinguished American evangelist and social campaigner. Some of you may remember that in one of his sermons he talked of red-letter Christians. In the States Red Letter Christians is the name of a new movement made up primarily of evangelicals who are disillusioned by the term 'evangelical. For in the States the label evangelical has been taken over by the Religious Right – to be evangelical is to be pro-war, anti-feminist, anti-gay, anti-environmentalism, pro-capital punishment and pro-gun. By contrast these new evangelicals want their life-styles to be defined, so far as possible, by the teaching of Jesus.

Let me quote from Tony Campolo:

“Red Letter Christians are not about to water down the teachings of Jesus in order to present a prescribed lifestyle that can be synthesized with American upper-middle class affluence. They represent a new movement among Christians which rejects the ‘easy-believism,’ that reduces Christianity to the mere affirmation of theological propositions... It is not that doctrine is, by any means, diminished in importance, it is just that Red Letter Christians put the emphasis on living a Christ-like life. They raise the bar when it comes to obedience to the things that Jesus said and expected of His followers. It is to Christ’s counter-cultural lifestyle that Red Letter Christians make a strong commitment”¹

Thank God, evangelicalism in the UK has not been linked with the religious right – or indeed with the religious left. Nonetheless, it is true that traditionally evangelicals in the UK have tended to put more emphasis on the theology of Paul rather than upon the teaching of Jesus. Over the next two months I want to redress the balance by focussing upon the Sermon on the Mount – and in particular on the final section of the Sermon to be found in Matt 7.

My text today is found in Matt 7.1-5.

We have already heard the passage read to us in the GNB version.

Let's listen to it in Eugene Peterson's version – The Message. True, it is a paraphrase and in many ways inadequate – and yet it gets to the heart of teaching of Jesus:

“Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults – unless, of course, you want the same treatment. That critical spirit has a way of boomeranging.. It's easy

¹ MT 51 (Spring 2011) A New Movement in America Gets Its Name

to see a smudge on your neighbour's face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own. Do you have the nerve to say, 'Let me wash your face for you', when your own face is distorted by contempt. It's this whole travelling road-show mentality all over again, playing a holier-than-thou part instead of just living your part. Wipe that ugly sneer off your own face, and you might be fit to offer a washcloth to your neighbour"

Wow! That's pretty strong stuff. Jesus certainly didn't pull his punches!
But what exactly was Jesus saying? Let's look carefully at the passage

DO NOT JUDGE OTHERS

In that case, said Tolstoy, the author of the great Russian novel *War and Peace*, let's pull down the law courts: '*Christ totally forbids the human institution of any lawcourt*'.

But the reality is that we cannot do without a judicial system. No civilised community could survive unless there was a code of law which was generally accepted, and observed – and where those laws were broken, judgment were passed and punishment exacted.

To live together in harmony we need judges. Indeed, Paul in his letter to the church at Rome speaks of judges as **"God's servants working for your own good"** (Rom 13.4)

But Jesus was not talking about the public administration of justice – as the context of this passage makes clear, Jesus was talking about personal relationships with one another. He is talking about passing judgment upon our **"brother"** (7.3). And almost certainly the brother in question is our brother disciple. When Jesus says **"do not judge others"**, he is in effect saying *"do not judge your brother or sister in the faith"*

But even that statement can be misleading.

The fact is that within the Christian community there is a place for a judicial process.

In Matthew 18, for instance, we find Jesus laying down the ground-rules for discipline within the Christian community. **"If your brother sins, go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back. But if he will not listen to you, take one or two other persons with you.... And if he will not listen to them, then tell the whole thing to the church. Finally if he will not listen to the church, treat him as though he were a pagan or a tax collector"** (Matt 18.15-17).

There is a place for a judicial process within the church.

But this is not what Jesus is getting at.

More generally, there is a place for discriminating between right and wrong.

In this very chapter Jesus tells his disciples to be on their guard against false prophets. **"They come to you looking like sheep on the outside, but on the inside they are really like wild wolves"** (7.15).

There is a place for discernment – for using our minds to make judgements upon people.

Indeed, as we shall see on another Sunday Jesus himself said that some people can be likened to **"dogs"** or **"pigs"** (7.6).

God has given us minds, and he expects us to use them.

No, when Jesus says “**do not judge others**”, he means “*do not be judgmental*”.

We are not asked to surrender the judgement of discrimination – but rather we are called to surrender the judgment of condemnation.

We are not to make final judgments on anyone – we are not to pretend we know God’s verdict on other people’s lives.

The reality is that there is so much that we do not know or understand about others.

There is always what my mother calls OFM – the one fact more, which may totally change our view of the person concerned. William Barclay wrote: “*The fact is that if we realized what some people have to go through, so far from condemning them, we could be amazed that they have succeeded in being as good as they are*”.

But even if we did know all the facts, even if we did understand everything, it is not our place to pass judgement – that is God’s prerogative. Rather, we are to be merciful.

Indeed, according to one commentator (FD Bruner), the command “**do not judge others**” is simply the Fifth Beatitude in reverse: “**Happy are those who are merciful**”.

Significantly, in Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount, the command not to judge others is preceded by the command “**be merciful**” (Lk 6.36) and followed by the command “**forgive others**” (Lk 6.37).

Sadly, too many of us Christians appear to have difficulty in showing mercy.

In the words of the great Indian missionary, Stanley Jones: “*Most religious people are not merciful toward the failings and shortcomings of others. Their very passion for righteousness makes them hard*”. But Jesus calls us to be merciful.

In the words of Hosea (6.6), which Jesus quoted against the judgmentalism of the religious leaders of his day: “**God wants mercy and not sacrifice**”.

Mercy is the heart of religion – both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.

And mercy should be at the heart of church life too.

It has been rightly said: “Harsh and petty faultfinding becomes a corrosive chemical that erodes relationships wherever people have to work together to achieve common goals” (Douglas Hare)

Thank God, our church is a very accepting church – judgmentalism is difficult to find.

Nonetheless, this is no reason why we should rest on our laurels.

We need to ensure that we remain an accepting, loving, generous community

....SO THAT GOD WILL NOT JUDGE YOU

It is in fact in our self-interest to be merciful and not to be judgmental

For as Jesus makes clear, there is an element of reciprocity at work

“**Do not judge others, so that God will not judge you**”. He goes on: “**For God will judge you in the same way as you judge others, and he will apply to you the same rules you apply to others**” (Matt 7.1).

Luke in his version of the Sermon on the Mount shows Jesus developing this element of reciprocity. **“Do not judge others, and God will not judge you; do not condemn others, and God will not condemn you; forgive others, and God will forgive you”** (Lk 6.37)

Wow, judgmentalism can be incredibly dangerous.

For the slide rule that we apply to approved and unapproved behaviour is taken from our hands at the Judgment and applied to us (so FD Bruner).

In the words of Matthew Henry, the great Presbyterian expositor who wrote a famous Bible commentary at the beginning of the 18th century: *“He who usurps the bench, shall be called to the bar”*.

The fact is that *“The most expensive thing you can do is to hold a wrong spirit in your heart against another. The price you pay is the loss, the eternal loss, of your own soul”* (Charles L. Allen).

Yes, our relationships with others affect our relationship with God.

A judgmental attitude towards others, excludes us from God’s pardon

We are not to live in the delusion that God forgives our sins when we do not forgive the sins of others. Remember the words of the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples: **“Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done for us”**.

Jesus then went on to say: **“If you forgive others the wrong they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done”** (Matt 6.14,15)

There will be a judgement – there will be a day when people have to give an account of themselves to God. But it will be for God, and for God alone, to judge.

In the meantime, we are called to show mercy to those who appear to have broken God’s laws.

“Do not judge others, so that God will not judge you”

Some evangelical Christians have struggled with these words. Does this mean that entry into the Kingdom is dependent upon our good works? Surely, we are saved through faith?

And that, of course is true. In the words of Paul to the Ephesians: **“It is by God’s grace that you have been saved through faith”** (Eph 2.8).

BUT the genuineness of our faith will be shown by the love that we display to others.

If we do not reflect the love of God toward others, then that will be because we have never grasped it in the first place. One is the necessary consequence of another.

E.g. if you go skiing in the Alps, you will inevitably return with a sun-tan: if you return looking white and pasty, then almost certainly you only got as far as the airport departure lounge.

If you have truly experienced God’s mercy, then you will be merciful to others

YOU HYPOCRITE

“Do not judge others, so that God will judge others”.

Jesus goes on to attack the judgmentalism of the religious people of his day with the so-called parable of the foreign bodies. **“Why then do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, and pay no attention to the log in your own eye? You hypocrite!”** (7.3,4a)

It seems to be a law of life that we consistently undervalue the size of our own faults and overvalue the size of others.

The most glaring Biblical example is the story of King David found in 2 Sam 12.1-7. David had stolen another man’s wife. Despite his large harem, he lusted after Bathsheba, seduced her, and caused her to become pregnant. At the time her husband was away serving as a soldier – and when David discovers the pregnancy, he arranges for Bathsheba’s husband to be killed. David is now guilty of both adultery and murder.

At this point the prophet Nathan enters the royal court: but instead of confronting David outright, a tells a parable, a short story about a poor farmer whose one little lamb has been stolen by a rich, powerful neighbour with a large flock of his own. David is incensed, and asked who this wicked farmer was. Nathan replies: **“You are the man”**.

Amazing as it may seem, David had been unconscious of the log in his own eye, and saw only the speck of sawdust in the rich farmer’s eye.

What was true of David, can be true of you and me. Sadly, it is all too easy to be aware of the wrongs of others, and not to see the wrong in our own life.

The American preacher, Phillips Brooks, who wrote the carol ‘*O little town of Bethlehem*’ once said: *“Whenever you see a fault in any other man or in any other church, look for it in yourself or in your own church”*

“You hypocrite” says Jesus. You seek to meddle with the peccadilloes of others, but fail to deal with your own more serious faults.

Jesus goes on: **“First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will be able to see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye”** (7.5).

Do notice that Jesus does not say that we should be indifferent toward faults in the lives of others – but rather, before we seek to help others, we must examine ourselves and ensure that we have put right whatever is not in order. There is a place for brotherly correction.

Indeed, Paul writing to the Galatians, said: **“My brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in any kind of wrongdoing, those of you who are spiritual should set him right; but you must do it in a gentle way. And keep an eye on yourselves, so that you will not be tempted, too. Help to carry one another’s burden, and in this way you will obey the law of Christ”** (Gal 6.6-2). Or as John Chrysostom, the great 4th century preacher put it when expounding the Sermon on the Mount: *“Correct him, but not as a foe, nor as an adversary exacting punishment, but as a physician bearing medicines”*.

BUT, says Jesus, before you begin to notice the wrongs of others, notice the wrongs in your own life; before putting other people’s lives right, put your own house in order instead. My mind goes to the story of the woman who was caught in bed with another woman’s husband. The Pharisees were all for condemning her. But Jesus said: **“Whichever one of you has committed no sin may throw the first stone at her”** (John 8.7)

The fact is that all of us have sinned – all of us in one way or another have broken God’s holy laws – all of us are in need of forgiveness.

BUT the amazingly good news is that God has had mercy on each one of us.

God has given us another opportunity to live for him.

In a few moments we shall eat bread and drink wine – we shall remember the one whose body was broken and whose life was outpoured that we might be forgiven.

In the words of John 3.17: **“God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its saviour”**.

This morning let me point you to Jesus – not just the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, but the Jesus on the Cross of Calvary.

Discover the forgiveness he offers you – & display something of that same forgiveness to others.

For Jesus says: **“Do not judge others, so that God will not judge you, for God will judge you in the same way as you judge others”**