

## "The Law Kept by Sympathy"

by  
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*"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces." -- Matt. 7:1-6 [NKJV].*

We come now to the fourth great division of this Sermon, which is contained in the first twelve verses of this chapter (omitting the passage from verse seven to verse eleven inclusive which, for the reasons formerly stated, appears to belong to the previous head). The remainder of the chapter from verse thirteen to the end I regard as a general peroration, or winding up of the whole subject, with a solemn warning as to the responsibility of those who were privileged to receive such instruction from the Lord.

This fourth division, then, rests upon the idea of moral sympathy. It requires us to imagine ourselves in the position of those whom we are about to judge, or in any other way to injure or to profit; and from that point of view it demands that we should regulate our conduct to them, doing what we should like them to do to us and refraining from what we should not wish to be done to ourselves. And here, in order once more to have clearly before us the whole drift and bearing of this discourse, let me remind you that the great fundamental idea of the Sermon is to show in what way Christ came not to destroy the law but to fulfil it. In illustrating that idea, He lays down four guiding principles--by keeping which carefully in mind, the whole scope of the Sermon will be easily remembered.

**First**, there is the Christian spirit of love, which is to embrace all men without restriction or limitation, as laid down in the 44th verse of chapter 5: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you." God's law is not fulfilled if we come short of that true Christ-like spirit of love.

**Second**, there is the great principle of unostentatious sincerity, laid down in chapter 6 verse 3: "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth." God's law is not fulfilled by any kind of hypocrisy or formalism but only by single-minded simplicity and truth, doing all things as unto God and not as unto men.

**Thirdly**, there is the high law of faith, which alone overcomes the world, as laid down in the saying, chapter 6 verse 33: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,

and all other things shall be added unto you." God's law is only fulfilled when we thus learn to trust our heavenly Father and to set our affections on things above.

**Fourthly**, there is the fine principle of moral sympathy, expressed in the 12th verse of this 7th chapter, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them: for this is the law and the prophets." God's law is not fulfilled unless we are thus guided in all our dealings with our neighbors.

Let these four principles be borne in mind and you will have the essence of this sermon in compact form easily carried about with you; and allowing for inevitable infirmities and shortcomings, easily applied in all practical emergencies. You and I are bound as men (we are doubly bound as Christian men, who have been redeemed unto God by the blood of Jesus) to illustrate that love, that sincerity, that faith, that moral sympathy by which alone the law of God can be fulfilled. Those four texts, then, may be called the four lamps of a true Christian life, shedding a divine and glorious light on as many different spheres of duty and surely guiding us on a path by which we may adorn the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

In illustrating the last of these principles, viz., that "whatsoever things ye would that men should do unto you, ye should do even so to them," the Lord selects for His first example the practice of uncharitable judgment of our neighbours, which is unhappily so prevalent. And here let me say in the outset, before investigating the precise meaning of those words, that it is not without reason that this warning is introduced just where it is.

The Lord has been exhorting men to a spiritual, not a worldly life--a life of faith in God, not of earthly care. Now it consists with all our experience that if there is any snare to which those who adopt that higher life are more liable than another, it is just this tendency to pronounce uncharitable judgment. How this should be the case I can hardly pretend to explain. Perhaps it is that being, by their own free choice, cut off from the more gross and carnal kind of sins, being debarred from indulgences in which others freely participate, their very superiority to the world in these respects engenders a kind of spiritual complacency [smugness] which, though forgetful enough of its own shortcomings, is always ready to see and to point at the blemishes and imperfections of a neighbour.

So it is, at any rate, that some who would not for worlds gratify the baser lusts of the flesh and who could not profane their lips with foul or ribald words, and who really are turning their hearts away from the allurements of this world and seeking to lay up treasures in heaven, will frequently be found practising the mean vice of the backbiter, ready to spy holes and spots in a neighbour's character, and prone to ascribe the worst meaning and the worst motives to everything he does.

One might say this is specially the besetting sin of religious people. They are not greatly tempted to commit those evils which are more grossly and glaringly opposed to their profession of godliness. The more carnal appetites and passions are kept under restraint with comparative ease. But they have a keen eye for discovering other people's faults. They have a great readiness to condemn other people's errors. They do not care to fling

the cloak of charity over a neighbour's shortcomings. Somehow or other their consciences are strangely blunted to those meaner vices of evil-speaking and bitterness, though they be indeed a root of mischief as deep-seated and dangerous as the worst vices of the world.

It is very sad to have to say this. It is the dark side of the Christian shield, the worm at the root of its glorious beauty. And because the heart of man is always the same, always showing the same weaknesses and liable to the same temptations, Jesus, who knew what was in it, follows up His exhortation to the life of faith and spiritual desire by this warning (fit now as it was then) to the more religious class of people: "Judge not, that ye be not judged. Why behold thou the mote [speck] that is in thy brother's eye, and consider not the beam [plank] that is in thine own?"

Ah! brethren, let us receive in all meekness this good word of the Lord. Let those of you who are seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness watch specially against this snare, lest it entangle your souls. How base it is! How far from the true spirit of love! What reproach it brings on the gospel! How dishonouring to our Christian name! And if we continue to indulge it, what ruin it works both on him who does it and on those who suffer by it, eating as does a canker into all that is good and lovely and of good report! I think, then, this word is specially addressed to those who are religious--those who can forgive their enemies, those who are sincere in their devotion, those who are laying up treasure in heaven. And knowing their weak point Jesus says to them, "Judge not, that ye be not judged."

But this word of Christ's implies (1) that we shall not be eager to spy out our neighbour's faults; (2) that we shall not be in haste to speak of his faults; (3) that we shall not be willing to ascribe the worst motives to him; and (4) that in such matters we shall be regulated by the great law of sympathy, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so to them." Let me draw your attention to these points in detail.

1. "Judge not, that ye be not judged." That is to say, be not eager to spy out your neighbour's faults, for that is not worthy, not Christian, not fulfilling the law of God. In illustrating this idea, our Lord uses a very beautiful and expressive figure.

He says that people who do this are like a man who can see a mote--a little, the very least particle--in the eye of a neighbour, and who is lamentably blind to the beam--the far greater evil--that is in his own. And He adds that if the man would cast the beam out of his own eye he would see far more clearly to cast the mote out of his neighbour's. This will require a little more detailed exposition.

Let me therefore say that our Lord does not here absolutely forbid us to form any judgment whatever of our neighbour and his conduct. That is quite impossible, and would not be for good even if it were possible. We cannot help having our opinion of other men, nor can we, nor should we altogether shut our eyes to their faults. Moral judgments of what is going on around us and of those who transact it we must needs form so long as we have a conscience, a moral sense within us. Nor were it good for us or for the world if we failed to do so. We must form opinions on others, and to be true, they must be

condemnatory of the wicked. And what is more, we should deserve the just rebuke of the Lord if we were so to confound the eternal distinctions of right or wrong as to withhold in all cases the word of honest reprobation from the evil doer.

Jesus therefore does not mean that we are never, in any circumstances, to judge our neighbour or to condemn him for the thing he has done. What He forbids here is the exceeding readiness we often betray to discover the shortcoming of others, and that more especially as it is frequently accompanied with a most wilful blindness to our own errors. For if we dealt more faithfully by [with] ourselves and were more resolutely determined to get rid of our own sins, we should see more clearly how to deal with our brother's, for we should have more brotherly sympathy with him. And that would help us to understand his difficulties and to appreciate his character aright, and to transact as a brother with a brother's frailties.

Therefore, let us not be in haste to judge others but rather let us judge our own selves. To understand aright the infirmities of our own character, and the guilt of our own lives, will either make us chary of sitting in judgment on others or will at least prepare us for forming righteous and just opinions by which we shall be helpful to them in their temptations. Let us, then, avoid the cruel habit of sitting in judgment on others, searching out their flaws, picking holes in their characters, finding motes in their eye. It is a poor work at the best--poor, mean, and ignoble. And meanwhile, as we watch the springing weeds in a neighbour's field, we forget how they are flowering and seeding in the garden of our own souls, which runs all to neglectful waste--barren and unfruitful of the true knowledge of Christ.

Brethren, it is the very curse of this uncharitable spirit of judgment that evermore its eyes are abroad about the ends of the earth, anywhere rather than where they should be--searching out our own sins and shortcomings. And so it comes to pass that evils grow like great beams in our own eye while we are searching out the small mote in our neighbour's. The more vigilant we are over him, the more careless we are of ourselves. The less we spare his faults, the more tender we grow of our own. The more vividly we see his smallest errors, the more blind we are to those which disfigure our own lives. And so in very truth the men who are most censorious are just the very men who are themselves the least faultless, the most indulgent to their own cherished sins.

A sad and unhappy, yet most natural result. They have no sympathy, not because they are faultless but because they are faithless. They have no consideration, not because they are sternly righteous but just because they make it their business to judge others and not themselves. They see the mote in another's eye but they cannot help him to cast it out, because in reality they have never cast the beam from their own. And thus this readiness to judge is at once the cause of growing evil in themselves and of their helpless inability to aid their brother. Their business has been not to cleanse out motes but only to find them out. Their business has been not to see their own sins but their neighbour's. And so they are alike neglectful of their own errors and helpless as to those of others. Verily and in every light unprofitable servants! Surely, then, it becomes us to lay that good word to heart, "Judge not, that ye be not judged."

2. This implies that neither are we to speak hastily of the sins of our neighbours. A readiness to spy out faults is one thing. It is another thing to be eager to speak of them and point them out to others.

I could imagine a person so constituted as to be always seeing the motes in his neighbour's eye who yet managed to refrain from unkindly speech about them. Such an individual is at least possible, though in point of fact the two things are generally combined. And this is indeed the mischief of that kind of character--that it seldom if ever refrains from proclaiming the faults which it is so prone to discover, reckless of the pain or the injury which it may thus inflict. Were it otherwise, the evil resulting from such a habit would be mainly limited to the man himself who indulged in it.

If anyone, giving himself up to an envious and detracting spirit, got into the habit of seeing only or chiefly the faults, the errors, the shortcomings of his brethren yet managed to restrain his lips from uttering to others what he thus saw or thought he saw, I should be sorry for that man. I should know for certain that his own sins were being neglected as he busied himself in discovering those of other men. I should also feel assured that he would inevitably form so low an estimate of human nature that all faith in its higher powers and heroisms and noblenesses would die quite out of him, and with their death he himself would be incapable of anything great or generous or high. I should be exceedingly sorry for such a man, though I do not know that his conduct could do much harm except to himself.

That which makes this spirit of unkindly judging peculiarly mischievous is that it is almost uniformly accompanied with a great readiness to proclaim its opinions; not only to see faults, but to point them out also. Moreover, even that might do no great harm but rather good, if it were done in the right quarter. If I tell his errors to my neighbour himself, it is possible [perhaps true] I might have been better occupied in dealing with my own. It is possible I may exhibit no very creditable or brotherly spirit in what I do. But still, if the matter goes no further, I do no great harm, perhaps may even do him a service. The eager fault-finder indeed deserves small thanks for pointing out the mote in his brother's eye; but were that all, neither should we care to blame him very much.

That, however, is rarely the true state of the case. Such men are not often content with forming judgments which they keep to themselves, nor are they satisfied with communicating their opinion [only] to the party specially concerned. But having seen what they think wrong, they are in haste to say it anywhere, everywhere--judging and condemning their neighbour. No matter though [that] the knowledge can profit no single soul. No matter though [that] it may be fraught with most disastrous results to him whose good name is thus assailed. No matter though [that] he [his neighbour] has no opportunity given him to vindicate himself and is going on in the most perfect unconsciousness that he is being robbed of his character. The backbiting, censorious spirit goes about its base work with growing heart and relish, reckless that "life and death are in the power of the tongue."

And it is characteristic at once of him who is thus ready to judge, and also of those who listen to his words, that neither of them take any pains to ascertain the real truth of the matter. The fault-finder, looking ever through the prejudiced medium of his own unkindly thoughts and piecing this and that together, draws his conclusion, and then is ready to assert for a fact what may be only the fancy of his own ungenerous mind. And those who listen to him, having commonly itching ears for all ignoble gossip, receive his words into a congenial soil which takes kindly to any unkindly judgment, asking no questions for conscience' sake; and so many an unjust and wicked sentence is formed and propagated, and infinite mischief done, without any opportunity to discover and refute its malice. And what makes this sin peculiarly pernicious is that even when the falsity is detected and exposed, the conscience both of the backbiter and of those who listen to him is strangely blinded and rarely feels any proper shame, but is fain to speak of its own wicked and pernicious conduct as only a mistake, an unfortunate mistake for which in fact he is almost as much to be pitied as blamed.

Ah! brethren, it is mournful to think how much of this evil spirit exists in the Church, how little is done to arrest its ravages, how few feel any conscience about it. Wherefore, putting away all malice, hatred, evil speaking, and uncharitableness, see that you judge not, that you be not judged.

3. This implies also that we are to watch against that uncharitable spirit which is ever ready to ascribe the worst meanings and the worst motives to our neighbour's conduct. This, in fact, leads directly to the root of the whole evil which we have been speaking of, and it is to me almost inexplicable how it can still retain the place it does among so many professedly religious people. For if there is any moral duty which more than another stands out as the very badge and symbol of Christianity, it is charity.

Paul, who in the torrent of his earnest and vehement argument seldom turns aside to indulge in bursts of passionate rhetoric, yet [even he] cannot help yielding to the sweet fascination of his theme when he comes to speak of the charity that covers a multitude of sins, and hopes all things, and thinks no evil. And as it rises up before his mind with all its tender and considerate grace, he gives way to one of the most glowing outbreaks of divine eloquence that ever thrilled the heart of man.<sup>1</sup> Thus enshrined in the heart of the gospel and exalted by the noblest utterances of inspiration, one might surely have expected that if there was one Christian grace which would be coveted and cherished and esteemed in the Church, it would have been this "more excellent way," this crowning glory and beauty of the Christian faith.

But alas! instead of this, how often do we find a mean and envious spirit which, because it is itself incapable of acting from high and generous motives, cannot apparently give anyone credit for higher principles than its own, and so with base detraction selects ever the worst possible motive for a brother's conduct and ascribes ever the worst possible meaning to it. There may not be even a shadow of reason for such judgment. The whole spirit and character of those whom he is condemning may be utterly opposed to the view

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1 The author is referring to that great 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians, often called "The Love Chapter."

he takes. But instead of thinking no evil he seems to think nothing but evil. Instead of covering a multitude of sins he would conceal and blacken the most shining virtues. Incapable of understanding what is noble, or of sympathizing with it, he regards it ever with a sinister and detracting eye. And if it is at all possible to explain the conduct of another man by mean and unworthy reasons, he is sure to find them out and ascribe it all to them.

And yet such a man will call himself a Christian, will profess to repudiate and keep aloof from the world, will talk of laying up treasures in heaven, will greatly relish what he calls religious fellowship (in which the fellowship mainly consists of an ample interchange of such uncharitable judgments). Alas! What strange anomalies we are! Is it any wonder that generous-minded worldlings are not attracted by a piety of this stamp--so envious, so pitiless, so much given to think evil of everyone, to find motes in every eye, and to make them where they are not; blind in the meanwhile to the beam in its own? Take heed, brethren, lest ye in this way dishonour the gospel and turn men's hearts from Jesus. "Judge not, that ye be not judged."

4. Let me remind you, in conclusion, that in all such matters we must be regulated by the great law of moral sympathy: "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them."

At first sight the words "Judge not that ye be not judged" might appear to be a mere appeal to our selfishness. There are various expressions of our Lord which, on a superficial glance at them, seem to be of this character, so that one might conclude that He enjoined us to do what is right not for its own sake but for the reward which it brings. But whenever we look narrowly into the matter, this aspect of selfishness speedily vanishes, as it does for example in the case before us.

You might conclude that Jesus counselled His followers to avoid uncharitable judgments, fault findings, backbiting, and all the other forms of this sin only because if they indulged in such things they would be tolerably certain themselves to meet with similar treatment. As a matter of fact, that is likely enough. If one were disposed to draw satirical pictures, one might easily show that the frequent groups of wicked gossips--whether worldly or religious--who assemble together for the purpose of tearing a neighbour's character to tatters, are, each individual of them, just as bitterly uncharitable to every other member of the group; that they do not spare each other more than those whom they agree to defame. And what is more, they know it too and do not trust each other.

That is a very miserable and melancholy account to give of them. But it is true, and it only shows that if our Lord meant to forbid uncharitable judgments merely because we might ourselves become in turn the victims of them, He really gave us no effectual motive for refraining from them and betrayed a strange ignorance of the human heart. For people do such things, and go on doing them though all the while they know perfectly well that they are themselves the victims of the same malicious device.

But in point of fact, that is not the Lord's meaning. To get at that you must place these

words, "Judge not that ye be not judged," in the light of that great principle, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so to them." Then its meaning becomes plain. It is simply this: "Judge not your neighbour in a way in which you would not like him to judge you." Do not spy out his faults in a fashion which you would consider unkind and ungenerous if done to yourself. Do not talk of his errors as you would feel it unfair to have your own discussed and babbled about. Do not ascribe base motives and wicked meanings to him which you would hold to be unjust if ascribed to you. You would like your own conduct to be scanned with a kindly eye, to be spoken of with tender consideration, to be explained as by one who hopes all things and thinks no evil.

Well, so do you to others "whatsoever ye would that they should do to you." Let that be your guide in all such matters. It is not a rule of selfishness, but of sympathy. It is to put yourself in the room of those whom your conduct may injure, and to deal with them as tenderly as you would like to be dealt with yourself. And if you do this for Christ's sake, because He has enjoined it, and because He also so faithfully practised it, and because love only is the fulfilling of the law, then shall you walk worthy of your high calling, and "the calves of your lips" shall be sweet sacrifice unto God. So may He grant you grace to illustrate that holy and sympathizing charity which is the bond of perfection; and to His name be praise.

This is Sermon XVII in *The Sermon on the Mount* by Rev. Walter C. Smith (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1867). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.