

## “Judge Not”

*Psalm 121; Romans 2:1-5*

October 23, 2022

A few years back, I was invited to judge a very, very important event in the life of Mount Holly, NC. You see, it was known that I used to be a chef so when it came time for the annual cornbread cooking contest, I was high on the list of celebrity judges. Wouldn't you know it? They called me and I was happy to avail myself for this annual event. As the weeks leading up to the event passed, I committed myself to being the best cornbread judge I could be. Not that that required very much of me, just so you know, but I did take the role very seriously. One of the things I was committed to doing was being IMPARTIAL. The best judges are always that, aren't they? So that's what I was determined to do. Well, the day of the contest came and I was ready. Didn't eat breakfast that morning to make sure I had plenty of room for all the various cornbread I'd be sampling. I get to the event and there is a fellow pastor of mine, waiting for me. "June Jones made cornbread this year, it's really good." The pastor of the First Baptist Church told me. June, her name's been changed to protect her anonymity, was known to me. A dear, dear woman who labored hard at the Community Relief Organization as a primary volunteer. Her service to that organization really allowed it to run smoothly. I was also a member of a board June was on and was continually impressed by her professionalism as well as her determination to do a good job. There was one other fact that weighed upon me – June had recently lost her husband to cancer. She was a grieving widow. I knew that very second, being impartial was going to be difficult. I now had a favorite in the fight and that can be poison for impartial judging. But still, I was determined to make the right, if unpopular, decision. But here's the thing – June's cornbread had actual corn in it. IT's a nice touch but one I personally don't like very much. Call me a cornbread purist, I don't need cheddar cheese, jalapeno slices or, as the case at hand would be, corn kernels. Long story short – I didn't like her cornbread that much. Now, guess who won the coveted prize that day? If you guessed June Jones, you'd be right. Technically, I think, I cast the deciding vote as the other two had split between June's and another.

Was I a good judge that day? In the strictest sense of the word, I was a terribly biased judge that day and, by my reckoning, that made me a terrible judge. I begin there because I think that's an important awareness for us to have right at the outset. We aren't terribly good at judging, at being impartial. In fact, some might suggest we're terrible at it. After all, there's always a June Jones in our midst isn't there, a reason to vote one way when the right call is in the opposite direction? Thankfully, the Bible gives us some of its most explicit instructions when it comes to judging people and that's a good thing. We need to be reminded.

Paul, as he writes to the church at Rome, writes boldly in the preceding material, providing a veritable who's who list of sins committed by idolaters. *"And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them."*

Remember, we talked about that last week, about how easy it is to succumb to idolatry, of worshipping something or someone other than the Almighty God known to us in Jesus Christ. This list is exhaustive and in the context of the letter, Paul is speaking about people without the Law. This section of the letter could've been read as an indictment against Gentiles – those who knew God because of creation but CHOSE to worship idols. So, if you can imagine someone reading this letter for the first time and coming across that list of sins being committed, it would've been easy to reckon Paul was talking about SOMEBODY ELSE. It's easy to read about someone else's transgressions, isn't it? Plus, doing so always activates that little moralist inside our heads which is firmly convinced we're the best thing since sliced bread and everyone else is shady as heck.

But then along comes Romans 2. Let's read it and hear what Paul has to say...*"Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard*

*and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed."*

This isn't the rosier passage of Romans, to say the least but it does make a point, doesn't it? It's the ultimate reversal. You think we've been talking about other people when, in actuality, this discussion of idolatrous sin is of you, too. It's a quick comeuppance for a church Paul's never met. I belabored that point a few weeks back for this very reason. See here the temerity with which Paul expresses himself. This is no cowering chicken for in the first two chapters, he's already begun the process of telling them some very difficult truths. And the difficult truth is this – when we judge others, we condemn ourselves for doing similar (if not identical) things. You see, when it comes to judges, we aren't very good, are we? We are all like me at that cornbread contest. Paul wants us to know here that we're in a spiritually precarious spot when we go about judging others. I think this is a true statement.

I had one woman from my very first church who was a very capable leader in the church. Whenever she was in charge of something, it always seemed to go fairly well. In fact, it was in my first year there that she was made an Elder in the church. I couldn't help but notice that many people were kind of cool towards her, I didn't think much of it to be honest about it. But as I worked more closely with this woman, I began to realize why there was such reluctance to get to know her. You see, she was a very gossipy and very judgmental person. Which, I recognize, makes me judgmental but that's a story for another day, I guess. Have you ever noticed that those two traits seem to go together a lot? That whenever you meet someone who is particularly judgey, that they also seem to be fairly loudmouthed about their opinions? I wonder if it's the same spiritual dis-ease that causes both of those negative traits. But what I also learned about this woman is that she was very lonely. One of the effects of being a harshly judgmental person is that most people tend to want to avoid you. But I think that loneliness that she experienced was entirely a function of her inability to keep her mouth quiet about other people's shortcomings. Paul talks about this in Romans suggesting that, again, when we're judgmental, we're exposing ourselves to a measure of God's wrath. That's an important word in Romans. God's wrath is His righteous judgment upon sin. Sin deserves to be judged by someone. Not us, mind you, not us, but that's not to say that there won't be judgement because there will.

Just like the Holiness of God, the justice of God is one of those topics we don't talk about very much but it deserves it. There is a judgment day for us all. The great good news of the Gospel is that we know the verdict on us ahead of time. NOT GUILTY! Not because we're not actually guilty, no, we're guilty as sin to use an expression that truly fits. Instead, we are declared not guilty because of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Living without sin and in perfect faithfulness to the Father, Jesus did for us what we simply could not do for ourselves. By allowing Himself to be crucified, Jesus paid the penalty for our sin, absorbing all of God's wrath towards those who believe in Jesus Christ. This allows for God to be truly just. It isn't the case that sin isn't punished. It was. It was crucified on the cross. Paul talks about this in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:21: *"For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."* Here's Paul alludes to the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the Cross. If *'He became sin for us'* does not mean Jesus was sin, or a sinner, or guilty of sin, the proper interpretation can only be found in the doctrine of imputation. This is confirmed by the second part of 2 Corinthians 5:21: *"So that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."* To impute something is to ascribe or attribute it to someone. On the cross, our sin was imputed to Christ. That is how Christ paid our sin debt to God. He had no sin in Himself, but our sin was imputed (attributed) to Him so, as He suffered, He took the just penalty that our sin deserves. At the same time, through faith, Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. Now we can stand before God sinless, just as Jesus is sinless. We are not righteous in ourselves; rather, Christ's righteousness is applied to us. Jesus Christ atones for us and the proper understanding of that should in fact free us from our pernicious tendency to judge other people.

Have you ever noticed how easily you judge yourself? Just the other day, I got cut off in traffic by someone who passed very aggressively on the right. I was steamed. Judged that guy, I did. But then, later that same afternoon running a bit behind to a meeting, I did the exact same thing to someone else. Funny how my bad driving was perfectly justified in my mind when that other person was condemned by me for being downright evil. This is a marker of our own spiritual malaise. When we are a harsh judge, it usually points more to what's going on in us than it does anything else.

Jesus talks about this in the Sermon on the Mount. There we read this – *"Judge not, that you be not judged."*

*For with the judgment, you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. 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? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is 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 brother's eye."*

As I was preparing this sermon, I ran across a really thought-provoking insight into this very scripture. The basic idea was that the log in your eye was not just your sin. The reason the author of that particular piece suggested it is that it would be impossible to remove every bit of sin from ourselves. Unfortunately, on this side of eternity, we are sinners born and bred. Although the Holy Spirit enables us to avoid sin, our human nature just can't be perfect on this side of eternity.

So, what does it mean to take the log out of your eye? This expositor of Scripture suggested that the log in our eyes was a very specific sin given the context here in the Sermon on the Mount. He suggested that the sin of judgmentalism was the log that needed to be taken out. That means that in order to be functioning well, we've got to be the least focused on judging others. Why is that? Well, for one thing, we are called to share the good news. That is, we're to evangelize the world, telling everyone we meet about Jesus Christ. The problem is that if we're doing that while also being harsh judges, no one will come. Remember that woman I talked about earlier. No one wanted to be around her for the most part because they knew what she was like. Well, when the overall attitude of the group is one of being judgy, then there isn't going to be much interest by people in that particular church. When non-church goers are polled about why they don't go to church, the number one reason cited is the hypocrisy of church folks. That they talk about forgiveness and love but, in actuality, are hard-hearted and judgmental. This kills more churches than anything else, I'm afraid.

So how do I become less judgmental? Well, there are several things you can do if you find yourself treading that well-trodden path. If you recognize yourselves as being a harsh judge, ask yourself why? Could it be that there is something else in your life that isn't going well that really needs your attention more than thinking negatively of someone else? IF you figure out what it driving you, give that up to God, surrender that hardness of heart, that fear, that anxiety whatever it is, just entrust it to God and pray. Prayer can do wonders for the soul, can't it?

Another thing to do is to be in the regular practice of confessing your own sins. And again, we're not Catholic so you don't absolutely need me to do that. You're perfectly capable of getting down on your knees and confessing to God directly your own shortcomings. But, confessing to another person has some real advantages. The Christian habits of prayer and confession will enable you to truly repent of your sin of judgmentalism.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.