

*Presbyopia*  
Lesson: Matthew 7:1-5

Let's be honest in the very beginning and say that it is not that we don't know what judging means. It's that the word means so many different things to different people on different occasions. We are not so precise about language as we ought to be... "judge" has a synonym spread – from evaluate to condemn, from critique to criticize, from appraise to denounce. So instead of looking at the subtlety of the words, we tend to throw them into one, blurring basket. We lose the ability to say what we mean because the hearer means something different by the same word.

For example: I graded papers while at Duke Divinity School. A bright student got a B on a case study. She appealed to the professor, who read the paper twice, added some more notes and reduced the grade to B-. The upset student asked for a conference with both of us, where she said, "I've been here 2 years and I have never gotten a B or B-." The professor replied, "We need some clarification here. I'm not judging you. I'm only grading a paper."

There is a difference in criticizing actions and condemning people, there is a difference in discussing differences or addressing defects and dismissing persons. Every parent should know the difference between "you did good or bad" and "you are..."

Jesus is talking here about our tendency to dismiss ideas and condemn people – judging from the protection of distance, not looking close and listening carefully. We generally jump to judgment because "whatever" is not like us. It scares us or intimidates us – maybe its mere presence forces us to see ourselves differently.

Jesus is talking about "Presbyopia" – the ability to see things far away and think we know what they are, but our own defects keep us from seeing things up close. Vision is both in the object on the landscape and the vision in the eye. And all of us who wear glasses know that the eye can be the problem more than the relative distance of the object. We need corrective lenses. And even people with 20/20 can mistake things close or far way. None of us have 20/20 spiritual and moral vision.

The question for today is pretty simple: Who is your spiritual optometrist?

I go to an optometrist. She is really good, even though I can't as well as when I was 20. I have "presbyopia," elder eyes, old eyes. I can see a golf ball almost as far as my son can hit it. It's up close that gives me trouble. I have "progressive lenses," fancy bi-focals. She has a Hispanic name, and I realize I have not asked where she was born or how she got here. Fact is I couldn't care. I like her, but more importantly she is a really good optometrist.

I know people who want "an American doctor." We all know they mean looks-like-them, European-roots American – not Hispanic or Indian or Muslim or different. In our distance vision, people who look different are generally dangerous, and we don't want to see them up close with bi-focals on. It scares us. What we do not want to admit is the world NOW is much more close-up than far away, so we are scared all the time.

***Jesus warns us: "God will judge you in the same way you judge others."***

*A Bad Option: Make your own prescription. Wear reading glasses. Put them on only when you need them for close up.*

So how do we judge other people? Well, mostly by whether they are like us or in some scary way different. We assume we are safe with the people like us – until they hurt us up close. Then we tend to judge and mistrust everyone. We assume we are safe from people who are different only when we keep distant from them – like in separate schools or even restrooms, or separate countries and keep them out. If we keep them distant, we are OK. We decide that “out there” is different and could be dangerous. Let’s admit we don’t have to be old to have “presbyopia.” In distance vision, we only see surface features. We have to be close-up to see the heart. Those “homeless people” become different when we sit down next to one of them in a Haven for Hope worship service. We never challenge our vision of evil in the distance until we meet the differences up-close.

The Presbyterian Church – the “elder” church – has been fighting a war about sexuality for a long time now. Too many see homosexuality with distance vision, because we stay distant from differences that scare us. Younger generations are not afraid of surface differences. They see sexuality in bad ways as fun and feeling, and in good ways as commitment and relationship faithfulness. Younger generations are scared of other things – big things they see close-up. They fear the way they will pay for our failure to pay the bills for our culture. And they worry about the global warming we are willing to put God’s creation on a short clock when we know it would inconvenience us.

Younger eyes are telling us to get our prescriptions checked, that the world we think is different looks a lot alike close up, that time we is where someone else can deal with the problems is flying by at jet-speed, and that people that God has made are just people up close. I was discussing this different view with a very bright as solid college student a few years ago. She told me, “Dad, good people and jerks come in all varieties.”

The NT does not pronounce distant judgments on people. Jesus dealt with everyone up-close, and his spiritual vision was the only vision that was 20/20. We had best be careful about judging others when our vision never is. God will judge us the same way we judge others.

We really don’t like to hear that God is a judge – at least, will judge us. We live in denial, but Jesus lived with this assumption that God would come, as the confession say, “to judge the quick and the dead.” So, when that mythical “lamb’s book of life” gets opened and God is deciding to average up your final grade for the course, the first step will NOT be what you did and didn’t do.

The first thing God will do is review: “Let me see how I have to judge you. Let’s review how you judged others like...,” and then God will read off the names of the people we have condemned, and help us recall the kind of judges we have been.” That fear of facing judgment like we judge is a pretty easy reason to say “I don’t judge others.” But we all do. In this church, all of us gladly admit that we are closer to blind spiritually, and being here helps us see better. But none of us has spiritual 20/20.

Remember the question? Who is your spiritual optometrist?

*The Good Option: Use the one who made both the light and the eyes, and even made sure you can’t see straight spiritually at some distance or other.*

However many different ways we say it, we Christians have the conviction that Jesus living on earth shows us who God is on earth and in heaven – and who God wants us be and to do here and now.

Now we know how God wants to judge us. ...the way Jesus judged. Let's learn from an example of his judging, Let's see who and why Jesus condemned some that others thought good, and seemed to be full of compassion for people others judged. Then we can be judged the way God wants to judge us, because we have judged others the way we he judged others.

There was this woman caught in adultery. Remember her from a sermon a few weeks ago? Jesus told her simply that he did not condemn her, that she should go on her way and stop committing adultery. But before he said anything to the woman, he condemned her condemners. He said the only one who can condemn to death is the one who came not to condemn but to save. He said they should be spending more time pointing people in the right way that pointing to the people who are wrong.

He said to them that their real problem was their optometrist. Their vision was distorted. They looked at the Torah and prophets the same way their people had for centuries, and they did not see the need for corrective lenses. They had presbyopia; their vision got worse as they got older. They were so busy looking on the horizon with fear that Jesus would change them that they could not see she was just a woman in front of them.

The difference in spiritual presbyopia from the physical kind is that it can be fatal – not just for the people we judge in Pharisaic, moral superiority. Presbyopia can kill us spiritually before we know it. Jesus told the Pharisees that their grades in the course of faithfulness had averaged up to spiritual death for themselves and their tradition. “Woe to you.” It is so sad and tragic for you, he said. You are like expensive caskets on the outside, but inside full of nothing but bones. You are like the beautiful temples of long ago, that sooner or later won't have one brick on another.

I don't have all the answers. I don't see that well. But I know that I want to deal with the sinners close-up the way that Jesus dealt with a woman one day a long time ago. And I want to work at Jesus' work long enough to know a walking casket when I see one.

I am hoping that God really is a judge, and that God judges differently. I am hoping that there are lots of people in heaven that I will be surprised to see got there. But I am also hoping that there will be a few of people in the other place that I am not surprised to miss at all.

If the instructions to Jesus' followers tell us anything, they tell us that there are a few places and some ways where God draws a line in the dirt and asks us, “Are you a follower, or not? Are you in or out? It's not about whether we are the “good people” or the “bad people.” The standard for good and bad can use lots of measures, and our vision is blurred. We need other eyes. We need to look with his eyes. We need to look with his vision.

Jesus says that seeking to do the example of his love in all of our living is the standard, and he assures us that if we just keep working at that ONE thing in the way we live with others, then we will live in him now and past judgment.

Otherwise, our lives cannot add up to the blessing in his love, and the truth Jesus knows is we will ultimately be happier in the other place anyway.