

“I Believe in God, But Not the Church”

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Pastor John Mars

This is the day that the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Good morning, Church! I want to read a passage of scripture today, taken from what we call the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' longest, uninterrupted oration in the New Testament: Matthew, chapter 7, beginning with verse 1.

“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.

“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.”

May God bless the reading of the Word.

A long, long time ago in a land far, far away, there was a lady tailgating a guy through a busy city street. He was going the speed limit, which was way too slow for her. He got to a stoplight, a red light, just as it turned yellow, and he slammed on the brakes and stopped, causing her to miss her opportunity to get through the intersection. She cursed at the top of her voice. She threw her arm out the window and flipped him off. And she continued to rant and rave until she heard a rap on the side of her car. She turned to look into the face of a very stern police officer. He commanded her to get out of the car. He promptly cuffed her and put her in the backseat of his vehicle and had her vehicle impounded, took her to the police station, fingerprinted her, and threw her in a holding cell. After about an hour and a half, the same police officer went back, opened the cell, and got her out. And he said, “Ma'am, I am so sorry. I made a big mistake. You see, I was behind you when you were tailgating that guy. I was behind you, and I heard you cursing at the top of your voice. I saw you flip that guy off. Then I noticed the chrome fish symbol on the back of your car, the “Honk if you love Jesus” and the “Follow me to Sunday School” bumper stickers, and quite naturally I assumed you had stolen the car!”

Not long ago, a survey was done of unchurched people in the United States on what their opinion was of the Christian church. 87% of the unchurched in the United States believe that the church is judgmental. 85% believe we are hypocritical. 75% believe we are too political. And 70% believe that we, who call ourselves Christians, who follow Jesus Christ as our example, 70% believe that the church is insensitive.

In his book, “What's So Amazing About Grace?”, Philip Yancey talks about a prostitute that he was trying to help. Putting the prostitution aside, there was a lot of other things in her life that she had done that she felt very bad for. She was trying to get her life back on track. She was in desperate need of support. She needed community. She needed people around her that would help her, support her, and encourage her. And Yancey suggested that she might try to find a church to attend. And when I read her response, it broke my heart. Her response was: “Church? Church? Why would I go to church? I feel bad enough already, and they would just make me feel worse.”

As I read the New Testament, the story of Jesus' life, Jesus attracted sinners like moths to a flame. And yet it seems that the church repels sinners. Something doesn't seem

right there. The perception of the world is that 87% believe that we are judgmental, 85% say we're hypocritical, 75% say we're too political, and 70% say we are insensitive. This is how the world perceives us. Now, you can argue with that, and I can argue with that. And you can say, "Well, that doesn't describe me." Maybe you can even say, "That doesn't describe our church." But you see, a person's perception is their reality, whether it is true or not. And that is how the world views us. We have an image problem that needs to be addressed. How do you fix it? Well, it starts with us as individuals. You see, you represent us. Pastor Aaron mentioned membership in this congregation. When you join this congregation, you make a simple vow: "I will support this church with my presence, my prayers, my gifts, my service, and my witness." That means you represent Jesus Christ, and you represent us. And how you treat others, and how I treat others, is how people are going to assume they are going to be treated by us. As a church, we must intentionally work on our image in the community. We must communicate to our community that we're not just about us. We can't be a silo. We got to communicate to our community that we're here to serve the community, to benefit the community, to help the community, to be a positive influence on our community.

Now, you will be pleased to know this morning that I'm not going to try to address all four areas. I'm reminded of a little six-year-old boy who was attending church for the very first time. The pastor knew it, and after the service was over, he said, "Well, son, how did you like the service?" And he said, "Well, I loved the music at the beginning and the end, but your commercial in the middle was too long!" So, I'm going to try to make sure my commercial is not too long. So, today we're just going to address judgmentalism. And Jesus had a lot to say about being judgmental. In our passage, Jesus says, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." There's no qualification there. He says, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." All of us have suffered from the misjudgment of others, have we not? Haven't you? Sadly, other people have suffered because of our misjudgment. And the reason we misjudge is because we don't ever have all the information, and we have our own unique filters that color what we see and hear. Jesus said, "Do not judge." The Apostle Peter, in his book, said, "Live such a life that your critics would be ashamed of themselves."

Jesus continues, "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, with that measure you will be measured." In other words, you get what you give. You get what you give, so give what you want. You can write that down. I like that! You get what you give, so give what you want. Now, as I was doing this sermon, I was smirking and smiling to myself when I got to this point, because every week (I think I could say that truthfully) every week, in some manner, in some way, in some arena, somebody says to me to the effect of, "All I want is justice! All I want is what is right! All I want is what is fair!" Now, I try to be pastorly and not snarky. So, I know that they're hurting, so I keep quiet. But here's what's going through my head: Number one, life is not fair; get over it. Life is not fair. Sometimes you get what you deserve. Sometimes you get better than you deserve. And sometimes you get just what you deserve. But life is not fair. And as far as justice is concerned, the Scriptures say that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and the wages of sin is death. You don't want justice; what you want is grace. Grace, in Greek, means "gift." So, God's grace is God's gift. God's grace is God's unmerited favor bestowed on the undeserving. That's what you want. And if that is what you want, that is what you need to give. I had a wonderful administrative assistant one time who just happened to be very judgmental and harsh. She had a very sharp tongue, and we had a few discussions about that. And she said, "Pastor, I just keep on forgetting that." I said,

“Listen, always err on the side of grace. Always err on the side of grace.” And one Monday morning I came into the office and there above her desk was a sign that she had made that said: “Err on the side of grace.” I like that.

Jesus said, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” And then he ends with an illustration about a person trying to get a speck of sawdust out of somebody's eye, all the while having a log hanging out of their own eye. Now, what do we believe Jesus did before he began his ministry in earnest? What did he do? How did he make a living? Carpenter. This is carpenter humor! Jesus would have thought this is hilarious! Here you have someone with a speck of sawdust in their eye, and this guy has got a beam hanging out of his eye, and he's trying to get the speck of sawdust out. He would have thought that was hilarious. He also would have thought it was absurd. “You judging others is absurd,” is what Jesus is saying. You've got no right.

We must look within ourselves, not at others. We can't see within others; we can only see within ourselves. And we cannot change others; we can only change ourselves. Paul said it this way in Ephesians: “Don't let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up.” James had a lot to say in his book. The half-brother of Jesus spent a great deal of his time in his book talking about taming the tongue, and how important it is to watch what comes out of your mouth. Part of our image problem is that many Christians have abandoned the teachings of Jesus, the teachings of Paul, the teaching of James and others. When it comes to judgmentalism, we tend to have the attitude that if somebody disagrees with me, then it's okay for me to criticize them.

So, I'm going to ask you to do something, as we collectively work on our image problem. Before you open your mouth, ask yourself, “Would Jesus approve of what I'm about to say?” Ask yourself, “Why do I need to say this? What are my motivations?” Ask yourself, “Does this build this person up or tear this person down?” Ask yourself, “How does God see this person? How does God see this person?” And I've got to throw this in here. Ask yourself the same questions before you hit “send.” Every time they come up with another social media platform, my counseling load goes up, because people will say things in social media they won't say to someone face to face. So, before you hit “send,” ask yourself, “Would Jesus approve? Why do I need to say this? Does this build the person up? And how does Jesus see this person?” We cannot change all of the world's perception of all of the church, but we can have an impact on the people in our lives. We can have an impact on our community. And when people think of Central, we want them to think, “That is a church that loves this community. That is a church that supports this community. That is a church that we can count on. They're not judgmental. They're accepting. They are loving. They're supportive. And we can go there for help.” Jesus attracted sinners like moths to a flame, and we should do the same. And the only way to fix our image problem is to live it down. You can't argue it down; you've got to live it down. Let's pray.

Lord, we want to be like You. Lord, we want to live such lives that people would see You in us. Lord, help us to live such lives, individually and collectively, that the people who need You would be attracted to us. Lord, help us to represent You in our personal lives and in this community. In Your name we pray. Amen.