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The Gospel of Luke
XIX. Good Measure, Pressed Down, Running Over
Luke 6:37-42

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Eugene Peterson, whose contemporary translation of the Bible, The Message, has become much admired and widely used, wasn't primarily a Bible translator, or a seminary professor or beloved writer on the Christian life – though he certainly was all those things. But what he was primarily was simply a pastor – the founding and long-serving pastor of the Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland. Which meant he understood intimately what life in the church is really like. And which also explains why I, as a pastor, am deeply drawn to something he wrote in The Message – a part of his brief introduction to the Letter of James:

When Christian believers gather in churches, everything that can go wrong sooner or later does. Outsiders, on observing this, conclude that there is nothing to the religion business except, perhaps, business — and dishonest business at that. Insiders see it differently. Just as a hospital collects the sick under one roof and labels them as such, the church collects sinners. Many of the people outside the hospital are every bit as sick as the ones inside, but their illnesses are either undiagnosed or disguised. It's similar with sinners outside the church.

So Christian churches are not, as a rule, model communities of good behavior. They are, rather, places where human misbehavior is brought out in the open, faced and dealt with.¹

Those last two sentences are so good, and so true, that they bear repeating: “*So Christian churches are not, as a rule, model communities of good behavior. They are, rather, places where human misbehavior is brought out in the open, faced and dealt with.*” But how, exactly, is this to be done? How do we, in the church, help one another with this ongoing problem of our very human misbehavior? Enter Jesus:

Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.

In dealing with the ongoing problem of our human misbehavior, the first thing the church and its members are to do is to judge not, condemn not. Which, speaking of the ongoing problem of our human misbehavior, tends to be one of the very first things that we do whenever the sins of a brother or sister in Christ find the spotlight of our attention. We hitch up our moral indignation and ride that high horse of judgment and condemnation as far as it will take us. Of course, we don't ordinarily do that judging and condemning right in the face of our fallen brother or sister – publicly we maintain a demeanor of loving the sinner, though hating the sin. But in the shadows, the gossip spreads, the judgment grows, the condemnation snowballs. Judge and jury we become – and the guilty party is quickly convicted, sentenced, and executed within the shadows of the community of faith.

But what does Jesus say to us? No! Don't do it! *“Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned.”* And He gives us two reasons why judging and condemning are not the way Christians are to handle the ongoing problem of our human misbehavior in the church. The first is right there in the prohibition: if we do this to others, says Jesus, He will turn the tables on us: *“For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.”* If we would think about what He is actually saying there, what that might actually mean – then that alone out to be enough to scare us straight on this issue of judging and condemning others.

For we all use a sliding scale when it comes to comparing our own sins against the sins of others. Like when we are driving and some idiot cuts in front of us – we rage and fume at their idiocy and condemn them to highway purgatory, or at least hopefully a traffic ticket. But then, when a few minutes later we pretty much do the very same thing to someone else, it is because we are such a skilled driver, the Richard Petty of the I-85 morning rush hour. And Jesus flat out tells us that we can't have it that way. If we insist on playing judge and jury over others, using our own sliding scale of justice, He will turn the tables on us. We will be judged by Him using the same scale we have been applying to others.

But, if that is not enough to convince us, Jesus then simply states the obvious: there is nobody, in any church anywhere, who is not a sinner – including you and me. So who, then, are we to stand in judgment over another sinner? When we have a log of unrighteousness stuck in our own eye, then who are we to think we are fit and right to judge and condemn the speck of unrighteousness in our brother or sister's eye? When it comes to sin, we are all basically in the same boat here. Because the real standard of judgment is not the sliding scale we use to justify ourselves and look down upon others – the real standard of judgment is the Word of God, the Commandments of God, the Law of God. And, to quote St. Paul in his letter to the Romans: *“There is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*² Or, to quote Jesus, one sinner judging and condemning another sinner is nothing more than a case of the blind leading the blind – in which everybody, in the end, just winds up in a pit. We don't judge or condemn one another because we are all consistent manifestations of the ongoing problem of human misbehavior in the eyes of God.

Which reminds me of one of my favorite stories from the early Church, somewhere around the 4th or 5th century. There was at that time a small group of Christians known as the Desert Fathers. As the name describes, they were disciples of Christ who went out into the solitude of the desert to seek to become closer to Christ and to live closer to the way, truth, and life Jesus laid

out for us all. They eventually began to form small communities out there in the desert – the early forerunners of the great monastic orders of the later medieval period. Anyway, here’s the story. One day a brother in one of these desert communities was caught in a sin. A council of the senior leaders in that community was called together to pronounce judgment upon this sinner. One of those called was Abba Moses, who was one of the most senior and respected members of the community. But he refused to come.

So, the council sent someone out to him, saying, *“Please come, Abba Moses, everyone is waiting for you.”* Abba Moses got up, filled a good-sized jug full of water, and put it on his shoulder. Now this jug, as Abba Moses well knew, had a leak in it. So, imagine him walking to this council meeting, water jug on his shoulder, and a steady stream of water dripping out of the jug behind him as he went. When Abba Moses reached the council meeting, and the council took in the sight of this leaking jug and the trail of water behind Abba Moses, they asked him what this was all about. And Abba Moses said, *“My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the sins of another.”* The council was immediately disbanded, and the brother who had sinned was forgiven and restored to the community.³ Judge not. Condemn not.

Which leads us to something else Jesus says here in this passage – something which we often overlook because the negative message, the “Thou shalt not,” is so sharp, clear, and strong. But this other message is actually Jesus’ instruction on how we are to respond to the ongoing problem of our human misbehavior – in our lives as well as in the lives of our brothers and sisters in the church. If we are not to judge, nor to condemn, then what are we to do? Says Jesus: *“Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you”* – mercy, that is. God’s grace and the chance to start anew. *“Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you.”* Grace.

How radically different an approach that is. And how very much like the way Jesus Himself has dealt and continues to deal with our sins against Him. We are not, says Jesus, to stand over our fallen brother or sister, wagging our finger and shaking our head – and, just in general, kicking them out of our elite and spotless fellowship. *“Judge not; condemn not.”* Instead, we are to draw up beside our fallen brother or sister, look them in the eye with tenderness, put our arm around their shoulder, and ask how we can help them get back on track, how we can be of service to them, how we can together come before the seat of God’s mercy, find forgiveness and be restored.

Philip Yancey, in one of his wonderful books on God’s grace, tells of a survey in which Americans were asked what words they most wanted to hear from someone else. The first choice: “I love you.” Number two: “I forgive you.” And number three: “Supper’s ready.”⁴ There’s some fine theology in those responses and in their ordering. What we are to do, says Jesus, is leave behind the dark shadows of gossip and judgment and condemnation, and instead embrace our fallen brother or sister – “I love you,” meaning among other things, that “I understand, because I am a sinner just like you.” And then, “I forgive you” – meaning that I live by God’s mercy every bit as much as you, and so I will not judge you, condemn you, or cut off friendship and Christian fellowship with you. And then, “Supper’s ready” – meaning, together let us go up before the Lord and sit at that table of His abundant mercy, partake of that holy food which is His grace towards

us, be nurtured by the love of the One who died just to set us free from our sins. What a glorious, grace-filled, Christ-like picture of what life in the church could be, should be, can be here and now.

It's there also in what Jesus says about the log in our eyes and the speck in our brother or sister's eye. We often don't really register the latter part of these verses, the part where Jesus says, "*First, take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye.*" Jesus is saying that the way we are to handle the ongoing problem of human misbehavior in the church is by becoming a mutual eye-cleaning society of humble, loving, gracious, supportive, merciful, kind-hearted people of God, imitators of Christ. You help me get rid of the log in my eye, and then I will help you get rid of that speck in yours. Not judge and jury and executioner to one another, but rather the bearers of God's blessing of mercy to one another.

Which reminds me of another story, a true one, and another picture of what Jesus is talking about. It comes from the days immediately following 9/11, when Gordon MacDonald was one of the pastors there on the scene in New York City offering care and prayer for the rescue workers. MacDonald said that very quickly he formed a friendship with a Trappist monk who was also there every day in his simple brown robe and white rope tied around his waist. MacDonald said so many of the workers, probably Roman Catholic, would come up to this monk and say to him, "*Father, will you bless me?*" And every time, says MacDonald, he would watch them kneel before this monk while the monk would pray for them and make the sign of the cross upon their foreheads with his thumb. Finally, MacDonald, being a Protestant pastor and so unfamiliar with such things, asked the monk, "*What do you say when you bless them?*" And the monk answered: "*I say, 'May the peace of God and the love of Jesus and the strength of the Holy Spirit be upon you. I form the sign of the cross upon your head so that you will always remember that God is with you.'*"

And, with that, MacDonald says he just immediately knew that he also needed such a blessing from this monk. So, he knelt down before the monk, and the monk made the sign of the cross on MacDonald's forehead, and pronounced the blessing: "*May the peace of God and the love of Jesus and the strength of the Holy Spirit be upon you. I form the sign of the cross upon your head so that you will always remember that God is with you.*" That done, MacDonald stood up, and then said to the monk, "*When was the last time anyone gave you a similar blessing?*" The monk said he couldn't even remember. And so MacDonald asked if he could give him a blessing:

The monk did not hesitate. He knelt instantly and accepted my hands upon his head.

"May the peace of God and the love of Jesus and the strength of the Holy Spirit be upon you. I press the sign of the cross upon your head so that you will always remember God is with you."

When he stood to his feet, we embraced, and we wept.⁵

That is how Jesus wants us to handle the ongoing problem of our human misbehavior in the life of His people, the Church. He wants us to kneel with each other and pray for each other, embrace one another. He wants us to lift one another up into the goodness and power of God's mercy. He wants us, not just to pronounce a blessing upon each other, but also truly to become a blessing to each other – as we together learn how to walk ever more faithfully, ever more steadily, in that path of faith, hope, and love He has laid out for us.

Or, as Jesus puts it: “*Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you*” – God’s grace, that is. God’s wonderful gift of grace – “*good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over will be put into your lap.*” Put into our hearts, put into our life together as God’s people – grace even spilling out from this sanctuary into the streets and hearts and world beyond.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 2201.

² Romans 3:22-23.

³ Benedicta Ward, The Sayings of the Desert Fathers (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1984), pp. 109-110.

⁴ Philip Yancey, Vanishing Grace (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p. 71.

⁵ Gordon MacDonald, “Praying That Makes a Difference,” Leadership, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Spring, 2012), p. 94.