

“The Monstrous Self”
Matthew 7:1-12
September 13, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

It’s not easy to see the connection between this final chapter of the Sermon on the Mount and what has come before this. At first glance, much of chapter 7 seems to be random thoughts that are disconnected from the preceding material and from one another. But upon closer examination, a connection does emerge. Much of the preceding sermon talks about the evils of self-righteousness. Jesus urges his disciples to trust instead in their heavenly Father who will care for them. Those who trust God instead of themselves will find that such trust enables them to have good relationships, and that’s what this passage is about. At the heart of good relationships is coming to see that self-trust is our big problem.

An old comic strip that was published in newspapers all over the country prior to the mid 70’s was the famous *Pogo* strip. Pogo’s most well-known statement appeared on Earth Day of 1971 when he said, “We have met the enemy and he is us.” The same could be said for our relationships. The reason the Bible gives for our difficulty in relationships is our selfishness. We are turned in on ourselves. Marriages fail when both spouses become so self-centered that they give up on loving the other. Churches split when people want others to meet their needs but have no interest themselves in serving others’ needs. In these verses Jesus discusses three evils of self, all of which must be dealt with if we are to love well.

I. Self-Deception

The self-deception Jesus speaks of here is that of the person who wants to remove a speck, a small sin, from someone else while not noticing the log, a much larger sin, in his own life. This person is full of confidence that he knows exactly what the problem is, and the problem is the sin of the other person. But, being the gracious person he is (or so he thinks), he is willing to help that person take care of that sin. The reality is very different from what he assumes. He is deceived about at least two things. First, he is deceived about who has the bigger sin problem. While he was convinced it was the other person, it was actually his own sin that was the problem. Second, he thinks that he sees clearly the sin in the other person’s life, while in fact he doesn’t. It will only be after dealing with his own sin that he will be able to see what needs done to help a friend with his sin.

I would like for us to get further into this by asking four questions of this text. First, what exactly is the sin that Jesus is forbidding when he says, **“Judge not, that you be not judged”**? It says something about our culture that this verse has replaced John 3:16 as the most often quoted part of God’s word. But in my experience those who quote it usually misunderstand it. For example, a pastor signed up on the Ashley Madison website and his board asks for his resignation when his actions come to light. Someone then might criticize the board for taking this action, using Jesus’ words here to bolster their case about the wrongness of the board. In their view, to declare that something is sinful is to be guilty of the kind of judgment Jesus forbids here. I am positive that Jesus did not mean to forbid us from saying that something is sinful when in fact it is sinful. If he did, then Jesus himself violated his own statement here and commands us in many places to do the same. I might also add that if this is what it means, then those who use this verse to say that it is wrong to tell someone that they are doing something wrong are themselves violating this command by doing the same thing they are forbidding others from doing.

What Jesus is forbidding is the judgmental spirit, a spirit that is dishonestly critical toward the faults of others. The dishonesty is seen in magnifying and even enjoying the sins of others, while ignoring one’s own greater sins. The big log-sized sins are not the Technicolor sins that are easy to see, because anyone would see those sins, and this person doesn’t see his sin. Rather, they are the big secret sins that are easy to hide—the heart filled with envy, with self-righteousness or covetousness. The judgmental spirit can be seen all throughout the Bible. We see it in Adam, who blamed his wife for his sin, judging her both for her sin as well as his own, while conveniently ignoring his guilt. We see it in King David when Nathan told him the story of the rich man who stole and slaughtered his poor neighbor’s beloved lamb, a lamb that was more pet than anything else. David burned in anger toward this man, while failing to see his much greater sin of stealing Uriah’s wife and then murdering Uriah in an attempt to cover it up. While there is certainly such a thing as righteous anger, it is this flying into a rage at another’s sin that is the clearest indicator of this judgmental spirit. The presence of anger suggests a helpful diagnostic tool for us in learning to see the logs in our own eyes. Whenever you find yourself getting angry at the sin of another, pause to ask yourself, “How am I like this person?”

The second question we need to ask of this passage after seeing what Jesus forbids is the positive question of what Jesus is commanding. The first thing we need to see is that Jesus does command us to remove the specks in our brother’s eye. People want to use this passage to support a “live and let live” philosophy that never challenges people about their sin. But it needs to be pointed out that Jesus actually commands speck removal. He does say, **“then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”** Here and elsewhere, we are commanded to rebuke and correct those we love when they fall into sin. We must not do what the Old Testament priest, Eli, did concerning

his own sons. God spoke to Samuel when he was still a boy and said to him concerning Eli and his behavior toward his sons: **“I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them”** (1 Sam. 3:13). The result of Eli’s inaction regarding his sons was the death of both sons, Eli’s own death, and the capture of the ark of the covenant by Israel’s enemies, the Philistines. To ignore sin is as unloving and cruel as a doctor who discovers some treatable cancer and then decides not to let his patient know about it.

Then there is a second part to Jesus’ command that is crucial. We are to do what we can to help others remove the sins in their lives, but only after dealing with the much larger sins in our own lives. Jesus says that if we don’t observe this order, then we will not see clearly to help others with their sins. If it weren’t so tragic, this would be a funny picture of a blind eye surgeon. The eye is a small and delicate organ. Imagine the damage done by turning loose a blind eye surgeon on this organ. If we attempt to help others with their sin before dealing with our own, we will do far more harm than good. To see why that is the case, think with me about this person with the log in his eye, the person with the big sin in his life that he doesn’t see. Several things will be true of this person when he tries to help others with their sin. First, since he has never really battled with the force of sin, he is likely to have glib, easy answers. Because he fails to see the power of sin in his own life, having never confronted it, dealing with it is easy to him. So he will be prone to tell people, “Just stop it,” or “Just do it.” Do you have a problem with pornography? “Just stop it or God will punish you.” Do you have a problem being generous with your money? “Just do it,” he will say.

This person with the log in his eye will not only have easy answers to difficult problems with sin, he will likely be harsh with others as well. His attitude will be something like, “I can’t believe you did that.” Such a harsh attitude will only make the other person feel more condemned and hopeless. The log-in-the-eye person will lack the kind of gentleness and humility that comes when we have seen the depth of our own sin. When we do what Jesus says and deal with our big sins, then our approach to people will be that of one beggar telling another where he can find bread. Jesus says that he will, for the first time, be able to see clearly. He will see that sin is too big a problem for any of us to handle. Indeed, it is a God-sized problem. He will see that God is full of mercy for big sinners. Armed with this clearer vision, he will actually be of use to others who are battling sin, rather than just another voice heaping guilt upon them.

This brings us to our third question regarding this passage. How do I remove the log from my own eye? Jesus doesn’t really answer that question here, but it is clearly answered in many other places in the Bible. It is removed through repentance and faith, which is just another way of saying that only

God can remove this log of sin. The good news is that Jesus can take care of even the big, life-dominating sins.

The last question I want to ask about this section is, “When do I stop speck removal?” Or to say it differently, what should we do if we try to help someone with their sin and they refuse to accept our help? We may do it all in the right way, with humility and gentleness inviting them to take their sin to Jesus and experience the freedom he brings. And still they may turn away from Jesus and from us. Jesus speaks of this in verse 6 when he says not to give dogs what is holy and not to throw our pearls before pigs. Dogs are gluttonous eaters, swallowing whole whatever you give them. You wouldn’t expect a dog to savor food from a five star restaurant, so you wouldn’t waste holy food on them. And if you were to make a gift of fine pearls to pigs, they would probably think they are something to eat. But upon discovering their inedible nature, they would simply let them fall to the ground and trample them in the mud. Pigs can’t appreciate the beauty and value of pearls. Unredeemed sinners can’t appreciate the beauty and value of Jesus and his gospel. So if we approach someone to help them deal with their sin through Jesus and they refuse to hear us, we don’t force Jesus upon them. We walk away and wait for another day. They need to be turned from dogs and pigs to men and women. We can’t do that, but God can.

II. Self-Trust

The next section is on prayer, and again the connection between this paragraph and the rest of the passage is not initially evident. I think there is a connection, and I think it is this. If we’ve been paying attention to what Jesus has just said about the importance of seeing and removing the logs from our own eyes, then we will realize the help we need. We are by nature self-deceived people who don’t see our sin very well at all. So we need to go to God for help to see our sin, and we seek this help in prayer to a heavenly Father who is eager to help us.

So Jesus invites us to ask, seek and knock. These three images describe what a child might do in calling upon her mother. She calls first for her mother, and if no response comes, she goes through the house in search of mom. Then maybe she finds her mom getting dressed in her bedroom with the door shut. Undeterred, the child then knocks on the door while calling. Jesus invites us to have this kind of persistent and confident approach to God as our heavenly Father. We can go to him and ask him anything and be confident in his good answer. Jesus encourages us with the promise that God knows how to give good gifts to his children. He uses the analogy of earthly parents. Jesus believed in human depravity and said, **“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”** It is a good thing to

ask to see our sin so we can repent of it and take it to Jesus. Since God only gives good gifts, we can take great comfort in knowing that he doesn't give us what we ask for when we ask for something that is not good. One commentator expressed this well. "If it were the case that whatever we ask, God was pledged to give, then I for one would never pray again, because I would not have sufficient confidence in my own wisdom to ask God for anything." I read this week the testimony of Kim Hume, wife of the broadcaster Brit Hume. After struggling with alcohol addictions for 8 years, she hit rock bottom and prayed this prayer. "I can't do this anymore, and I don't see any way out, and would You just please, please, please take me?" Graciously, God said "No," and instead of taking her life gave her new life in Christ.

III. Self-Centeredness

The Golden Rule represents a complete reversal of self-centeredness, the reversal of "looking out for number one." The Golden Rule, to do to others whatever you wish they would do for you, is to be the guiding principle in all we do. The truth is that no set of rules, even the perfect rules of the Bible, can anticipate and precisely address every situation in which we find ourselves. But this is the universal rule that fits every situation. We are being directed here to put ourselves in the place of others and doing for them what we would want done for ourselves. This is God-like love, the substitutionary love that God has given to us through Jesus. He died in my place, literally putting himself in my place, the place of suffering the wrath of God for my rebellious heart. Through him, I have a place within the fellowship of the Trinity itself. Now God asks me to go and engage in this substitutionary love myself, asking not what I want done for me, but what others need that I can provide for them.

CONCLUSION:

Imagine a life free of the monster of self. There is no self-deception, no self-trust and no self-centeredness. You can pass a mirror without being puffed up with pride because you think you look good, or depressed because you think you look terrible and there is no hope ever for any significant improvement. You can stop performing for the opinion of others all the time. I want you to hear the good news that such a life is possible. It comes as we ask God to help us see the logs in our own eyes, repent of those sins and receive God's forgiveness. It comes as we believe we have a Father who loves to give us the good gifts of repentance and faith, and then follow God into substitutionary love, just like God's love for us. It comes as we receive all that we have in Christ.