

## “Blinded by an Eye-Beam?”

Matthew 7:1-5

*Series: Half-Truths Week 5. Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin*

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Some years ago my wife Lisa and I decided to go to a late afternoon movie. I soon learned that’s when all the retired people go. The line was full of sweet old couples who were taking their sweet old time debating which movie they wanted to see, getting out their money, picking up their tickets. I felt I exhibited tremendous Christ-like patience, tolerance and love toward my elders. “After all,” I said to myself, “one day that will be me.” Finally, after much forbearance it was my turn to buy our tickets. As I left the counter and entered the lobby I said to Lisa, “This was a great idea to come early. The ticket price is so much cheaper at a matinee.” She looked at the ticket and said, “That’s because they gave you the Senior Discount.”

She had a good laugh at my expense...until I pointed out she got it too.

Judging others. It’s easy to do. Our eyes take in about 10 million bits of data per second.<sup>1</sup> Our minds use that stream to make evaluations, assessments and judgments. Judging others is as automatic as blinking. Before you know it, you’ve already done it.

Our final Half-Truth, “Love the sinner, hate the sin,” tells us what to do with our judgments. It sounds compassionate. Even when we do not like someone’s behavior, even when we oppose what they do, God still wants us to love them. After all, Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount

You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:43-45)

God loves the evil and unrighteous person. He doesn’t shut off their sun and keep rain from falling on their crops. If God still loves the sinner in spite of their sin, shouldn’t we?

Yet just a little later in the same sermon on the same mount Jesus tells us to not judge. 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. (Matthew 7:1-2)

Why is it wrong to judge others? **When we judge we lay a trap for ourselves.** Jesus says if you judge others, you’ll be judged the same way. If someone doesn’t measure up to your standard, that standard will be applied to you. It’s like falling into a trap you set for someone else.

In the early years of World War II, Scottish scientist Robert Watson-Watt discovered that radio waves could be used to locate enemy airplanes. His invention – radar – was a critical tool in the defense of England during the Battle of Britain. Years later, Robert Watson-Watt was

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.eurekaalert.org/pub\\_releases/2006-07/uops-prc072606.php](https://www.eurekaalert.org/pub_releases/2006-07/uops-prc072606.php)

living in Canada when a policeman pulled him over for speeding. The cop caught him by using a radar gun. Poking fun at himself, he penned this poem:

Pity Sir Robert Watson-Watt,  
Strange target of his radar plot,  
And this, with others I could mention,  
A victim of his own invention.

It's incredibly easy to step in our own judgment trap. A friend of mine summarized Jesus' teaching when he simply said, "You spot it, you got it." If you criticize what others say and do, it's likely you say and do the same things. It's like the person who goes on and on about someone who talks too much, the one who complains to all their friends about another who gossips, the one who is furious with the person that loses his temper. Don't you hate people like that? If you find yourself irritated by someone who is controlling, boring or has bad breath there's a good chance you've got it.

Jesus also warns us **when we judge we are blind to ourselves**. He continues, 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. (Matthew 7:3-4)

Jesus illustrates how ridiculous it is to judge others. In the original Greek, Jesus compares a tiny splinter to a massive beam – a main support for a building. How can I possibly see and remove the small sliver in your eye when there's an eye-beam as big as a house blocking my vision? One word for this kind of unconscious blindness is bias. At a Conference in Detroit, African-American minister Raleigh Washington, President of Promise Keepers, illustrated bias this way:

When I was born, I was black. When I grew up, I was still black. When I go out in the cold, I'm still black. When I go out in the sun, I get more black. When I'm sick, I'm black, and when I die, I'm sure I'll still be black.

But I found out that when white people are born, you're pink. When you grow up, you become white. When you go out in the cold, you turn blue. And when you stay out in the sun, you turn red. When you're sick, they say, "You look green." Now what I want to know is why do they call blacks "colored people?"

Why is bias so blinding? Why is it hard to see? Researchers at the University of Toronto and James Madison University produced a study called, "Cognitive Sophistication Does Not Attenuate the Bias Blind Spot." That's a very complicated way to say being smart doesn't make you less blind or biased. The study found we cut ourselves more slack than we give others. Why? An article by Jonah Lehrer in *The New Yorker* explains it like this:

When considering the irrational choices of a stranger, for instance, we see their biases from the outside, which allows us to glimpse their errors. However, when assessing our own bad choices, we study our motivations and search for relevant reasons. As an

example, if we drive crazy through traffic it's because we have an important meeting or we don't do it that often, and so forth. But if someone else cuts us off in traffic there's one simple, observable explanation: he's a jerk. Lehrer concludes "our bias blind spots are largely unconscious, which means they remain invisible to self-analysis and resistant to intelligence." In other words, being smarter won't help you see your own junk. As a matter of fact, more intelligence may add to the problem.<sup>2</sup>

Bias blinds us and prevents us from accurately judging others. What's the solution? Jesus says work on yourself first. Before you begin telling others how to improve, get rid of the eye-beam that blinds you. Offer it up to God. In other words: beam it up. How? This is not easy but it works. Ask someone you trust to tell you. I suggest asking someone outside your family. Give them permission to point out your blind spots, your shortcomings, the flaws in your character – the planks you can't see. That's strong medicine. Yet if you listen and go to work on them, you'll be able to see yourself and others more clearly. We all have a choice: if we don't talk about the plank, we may wind up walking the plank.

Finally, **when we judge we put ourselves in God's place.** In his letter to the Romans, Paul says,

Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God (Romans 14:4, 9-10)

Only God can judge since He is the only Lord and Master and we are all His servants. All of us have sinned. All of us receive His grace. None of us has the right to judge another. If you had an older brother or sister who tried to boss you around, who acted like they were your parent when your parents were not around you know what Paul is saying here. God is the only Judge and yet this Judge was judged in our place. This means the only One who has the right to judge us is the very One who wants to help us stand. If God loved that person so much how can you condemn them? So don't put yourself in God's place when God put Himself in your place.

This is why the cliché "Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin" is not Biblical. The first half of it – Love the Sinner – sounds compassionate. Yet it subtly sets you up as superior over someone. It makes you that person's judge. "Look how tolerant, kind and loving I am to this poor sinner." It also labels a person as a sinner. Sure they've sinned. So have I. So have you. Yet that's not the whole story about any of us. That's also not how God sees us in Christ.

The second half – Hate the Sin – is also a problem. It seems to target certain sins as more deadly than others. Here I disagree with Adam Hamilton in the book. He argues that some sins are worse than others. In one sense that's true. Eating too many Krispy Kreme donuts does not cause as much harm as drunk driving. Yet he's focusing on the horizontal level. Some sins do cause more evil on earth than others. But when it comes to our vertical relationship with God,

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<sup>2</sup> Craig Gross, Open (Thomas Nelson, 2013), pp. 139-141

when it comes to the spiritual world – any sin drives a wedge between us and the Lord. Jesus said,

Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles. Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.” (Matthew 15:10-11, 17-20)

Thoughts give birth to actions. That’s why thoughts make us unclean and separate us from God. In the spiritual realm, all sin separates us from God. All sin needs healing and forgiveness.

As with the other Half-Truths in this series there are two extremes to avoid. On the one side is Condemning. We’ve already seen the danger of acting like God and judging others. The other side is Condoning. It’s popular these days to decry those sins which harm others but tolerate or even bless such sins as lust, greed, laziness, pride or gluttony so long as you’re not hurting anyone. That’s your business. Go ahead and do whatever you like. Well the fact is you are hurting someone – yourself and your relationship with God. And you probably are hurting others but you’re blind to it. That’s called denial. Often, we swing back and forth between condemning and condoning.

Jesus faces this challenge when a group of Pharisees and teachers of the law throw down before Him a woman caught in adultery. They use her as a test case to trap Jesus. If He says “Stone her as the Law teaches” Jesus will be arrested by the Romans who forbid stoning. They are watching from the Antonia Fortress which towers over the Temple plaza. On the other hand if Jesus says, “Let her go,” the elders can accuse Him of breaking God’s Law. It is a clever trap.

Yet Jesus does not step into it. Instead, He turns the trap on them. “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” (John 8:7). He makes them judge themselves. One by one they drop their stones and walk away until Jesus is left alone with the frightened and disheveled woman. When they are all gone, He straightens up from writing in the dust, looks at her and says, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she says. Well there is One there who is without sin. There is one who has the right and authority to judge and condemn her. And now He pronounces His judgment:

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. ‘Go now and leave your life of sin.’” (John 8:11). He doesn’t condemn. He doesn’t condone. He asks her to change. He knows the toxic, painful, corrosive effect sin has on a soul. Yet Jesus does not force her to change. He doesn’t shame or berate her. He doesn’t issue threats or ultimatums. He simply advises her to go another way and then He goes on His way.

Instead of “Love the sinner, hate the sin” why not do what Jesus really said, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). And to love you neighbor, it helps to know your neighbor. In 2008, Paul Herbert, a municipal court judge from Ohio, was reading Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* to his teenage daughters. One night, one of his daughters asked him,

"Daddy, what's your purpose in life?" That night he prayed candidly to God: "I realize that being a judge is a very unique position. Not many people get this opportunity. Can you show me some way that I could be significant for you in my work?"

About nine months later, after seeing a typical procession of domestic violence victims, the sheriff brought a streetwalker into Herbert's courtroom. Herbert realized that she looked exactly like one of the domestic violence victims he'd been seeing. It shook up his categories. After some research, Herbert was stunned to learn around 87 percent of these women are abused, typically starting at around age 8. They often start using drugs to deal with that trauma around age 12. The girls run away from home and are dragged by predatory pimps into the trade.

Herbert decided to launch a new program called CATCH Court, which stands for "Changing Actions to Change Habits." Prior to this program, such women simply cycled in and out of jail. But through Herbert's two-year program, the women received drug treatment and counseling. They offer support to each other and check in weekly with Judge Herbert to report on their progress. "These ladies are the most appreciative individuals I've ever met," he said. "The world has literally crushed them." Herbert describes how some of the women are sober from heroin, attend Community College, and reclaimed their children from foster care. But Herbert also emphasizes the spiritual transformation that has occurred in his life:

The Holy Spirit continues to reveal how much I've been forgiven, and how similar I am to the individuals that come before me. That's really hard to say! My job is to judge. But the farther I go along in my faith, the more I realize that I'm just like most of them—and that makes me more understanding, more kind, more merciful.<sup>3</sup>

Judge Herbert lifted his eye-beam up to God so he could help others. How about you?

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Amy Sherman, "Oldest Profession, or Oldest Oppression? Ohio Judge Creates Court for Abused Prostitutes," Christianity Today (6-1-12)