

GOD'S GOT THIS

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



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Matthew 7:1-6
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Matthew 7:1-6

Robert Farrar Capon was a somewhat eccentric Episcopalian priest who had a way with words. Here's one of his quotes:

God has dangerously odd tastes: he is inordinately fond of risk and roughhouse. Any omnipotent being who makes as much room as he does for back talk and misbehavior strikes us as slightly addled. Why, when you're orchestrating the music of the spheres, run the awful risk of letting some fool with a foghorn into the violin section? Why set up the delicate balance of nature and then let a butcher with heavy thumbs mind the store? It seems—well, irresponsible.¹

The claim of the Scriptures is that God is sovereign over everything that happens in our world—in other words, God is in control. Who among us hasn't questioned such a claim? Who among us, because God seems so hands-off, hasn't tried to impose our will on our world?

In Matthew 7:1-6, Jesus shows us two ways in which we attempt to impose our will on the world, and he shows us a better way.

Don't condemn

Matthew 7:1-2:

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.”

To “judge” here is not to distinguish between good and evil or between right and wrong but to “condemn.” Jesus tells us not to condemn other people.

Why do we condemn? We condemn in order to control other people and manage our unpredictable world. We worry about what other people will do to us or to our world; therefore, we hope that they will feel our condemnation, see the error of their ways, and “straighten up and fly right.”

Groups especially practice condemnation to maintain standards on the inside and ward off threats from the outside. One group condemns another group, and if condemnation doesn't work, it goes to war, sometimes literally.

Think how it feels to be condemned. It can slice right through you and rupture your heart. Condemnation can make you feel worthless, barely human. Many of us know how this feels because we tend to condemn ourselves.

Does condemnation work? Usually not. Condemnation doesn't do what we want it to do. If someone condemns you, are you going to do what the person condemning you wants you to do? Out of fear, you might. But condemnation rarely leads to lasting change. Most especially, it rarely leads to a change of heart.

Usually, condemnation backfires. Almost always, it generates return fire. People hate to feel condemnation, and in order not to feel it, they condemn in return, if only in their minds. Condemn not, Jesus says, so that you will not be condemned.

Condemned by whom? Does Jesus mean that if we condemn others that other people will condemn us, that God will condemn us, or both? In verse 6, the result of treating people in a certain way is that they, not God, will respond in a certain way. Jesus would seem to be warning us that if we condemn other people, other people will condemn us. Do not condemn, Jesus says, because what you measure out to others will be measured out to you. In contemporary language, what goes around comes around.

We see this dynamic playing out in our world, don't we? Especially these days, we see it playing out in social media.²

Give up the illusion

Shouldn't God do something about all these people who are messing up the world, the foghorn-blowing fools and the heavy-thumbed butchers? He doesn't seem

to be doing much of anything, which is why we feel the need to step up. By all appearances, God is relentlessly committed to human choice, so much so that many people simply don't believe he exists, because he seems so absent. God seems recklessly hands-off.

Well, what is he doing? One thing's for sure: he isn't condemning. John tells us, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). Jesus says, "I did not come to judge the world but to save the world" (John 12:47).

God is saving the world, not condemning the world. True, he sends his Spirit not least to "convict the world," but only that he might save it (John 16:8). True, there will come a time when everyone will stand before God, and if someone does not confess allegiance to Christ, God will condemn him or her to hell, because in the end, that's what that person chose. Until then, God is saving, not condemning.

We shouldn't stop discerning between good and evil, between right and wrong. We must trust the Spirit for when to speak and how to speak, especially in these hypersensitive times, which feature micro-aggressions and trigger warnings. When we do, we must cling tenaciously to the belief that people and the world are God's responsibility, not ours, and that God is interested in saving people, not condemning them. We must give up the illusion that we can control people and our world, and we must especially give up the illusion that we can control people and our world through condemnation.

Someone to do things to

In C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*, some ghost-like people in hell take a trip to the outskirts of heaven and can't stand the place. It's too real. In one interchange, a resident of hell implores a resident of heaven to let her have her husband back. Listen as the ghost-like figure speaks about her husband, Robert, to Hilda:

"I'll make them a fair offer, Hilda. I will not meet him, if it means just meeting him and no more. But if I'm given a free hand I'll take charge of him again. I will take up my burden once more. But I must have a free hand. With all the time one would have here, I believe I could make something of him. Somewhere quite to ourselves. Wouldn't that be a good plan? He's not fit to be on his own. Put me in charge of him. He wants firm handling. I know him better than you do. What's that? No, give him to me, do you hear? Don't consult him: just give him to

me. I'm his wife, aren't I? I was only beginning. There's lots, lots, lots of things I still want to do with him. No, listen, Hilda. Please, please! I'm so miserable. I must have someone to—to do things to. It's simply frightful down there. No one minds about me at all. I can't alter them. It's dreadful to see them all sitting about and not be able to do anything with them. Give him back to me. Why should he have everything his own way? It's no good for him. It isn't right, it's not fair. I want Robert. What right have you to keep him from me? I hate you. How can I pay him out if you won't let me have him?"

When the woman from hell says she must have someone to "do things to," she's saying she must have someone to control—someone to control by condemning. She's spent her whole life doing that and she doesn't know how to even want anything else. What a horrifying vision!

If we want to condemn others, is it possible that we're not seeing things right?

Because I want to

Matthew 7:3:

"Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?"

Why do I see the speck in my brother's eye while not noticing the log that is in my own eye? If I think about the question, my answer is, "Because I want to." I want to see the speck in my brother's eye. I'm looking for it. I'm looking for flaws in other people. I want to see flaws in other people.

First, I want to see flaws in other people to feel better about myself. Deep down, I fear that I've got some flaws, but I'd rather not know about them. Therefore, if I can identify my brother's flaws, I can avoid facing my own flaws and be assured that if I have flaws, whatever they are, they probably aren't as bad as those of other people.

Second, I want to see flaws in other people to prove to myself that I am quite right not to trust people because, after all, they're quite flawed. Seeing the flaws in others confirms for me my suspicions that I should keep my distance from them.

Why don't I notice the log in my own eye? What, there's a log in my eye? If there's a log in my eye, I don't notice it because I don't want to notice it. I prefer to live in denial.

What log?

Matthew 7:4-5:

“Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”

How can I say this to my brother? Very easily! Watch me!

I’m more than happy to ask my brother to let me take the speck out of his eye. It would be my pleasure. How can I even make such an offer when there’s a log in my own eye? Log? What log? You say there’s a log in my eye? You must be seeing things!

But if there were a log in my eye (hypothetically speaking, of course), then I suppose I wouldn’t be qualified to take the speck out of my brother’s eye. I wouldn’t even be able to see the speck in my brother’s eye, let alone remove it, because of the log in my own eye.

What, I’m a hypocrite? Sure, I’d be a hypocrite if I were calling out my brother’s flaws while being ignorant of my own. But I’m not, because there isn’t a log in my eye. There isn’t even a speck in my eye.

What, I’m supposed to remove the log from my own eye? How am I going to do that? There’s no log to remove! Well, yes, if there were a log there (hypothetically speaking, of course), I suppose I should remove it. And if there were a log in my eye, removing it would certainly help me to see so that I could help my brother with the speck in his eye.

But there’s no log in my eye. I can’t see a log. Do you see a log? No, wait, on second thought, don’t even look. There’s nothing there.

Where was I? Oh yes, the speck in my brother’s eye. “Hold still. Wait, there’s something in my eye. Oh, wait a minute, no there isn’t. I’ve got this. Hold still . . .”

Don’t control people by condemning them. How else do we try to control people?

Don’t force

Matthew 7:6:

“Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.”

Literally, Jesus instructs us not to give “the holy” to dogs. Meat that was reserved for priests to eat was called “the holy” (Leviticus 22:10). If you give special meat to dogs, they won’t appreciate it; to them it’s just meat. Likewise, pigs can’t recognize the value of pearls. If you give them pearls when they’re hoping for food, they’ll trample on the pearls. They might even attack you, because at least you, unlike pearls, are edible.

Surely, Jesus isn’t teaching us about the animal kingdom; he’s teaching us about the kingdom of heaven, and he is doing so by using illustrations from the animal kingdom. Holy meat and beautiful pearls represent aspects of the kingdom. We pray that our Father’s name would literally be made “holy” and that his kingdom would come (Matthew 6:9-10). Jesus also likens the kingdom heaven to a “pearl” (Matthew 13:45-46).

So, just as we are not to try to control people by condemning them, we are not to try to control people by forcing on them the good things of the kingdom of heaven. Our Father will “give good things to those who ask him,” but some people have no use for such things (Matthew 7:11). In fact, they may resent you for “helping” them in a way that, from their perspective, doesn’t help them at all. Moreover, we’re not helping, if people aren’t able to perceive such efforts as helpful. Furthermore, we may be hurtful, even damaging to the cause of the kingdom.

I once knew a man who was resentful when informed that people were praying for him to repent, as if he needed to be prayed for, as if he needed to repent. His response? “Send money”—meaning, “if you really want to help me, stop praying for me and send me money instead.”

When Jesus sent out his disciples to preach, heal, and cast out demons, he used another illustration from the animal kingdom: “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). Of course, we should offer people the good things of the kingdom of heaven, but we must be wise about it, sensitive to opportunities like a snake, and also innocent as we do

it, not forgetting about the person in favor of winning the argument and not returning evil for evil. We must not try to control people by forcing the good things of the kingdom on them.

When we sense the opportunity to offer someone the good things of the kingdom, we must be equally sensitive to his or her response. We must be careful not to force anything on anyone, and we must back off if we sense that we're offering what isn't wanted.

Power play

When I was a much younger man, I was involved with a woman who decided to break up with me and break up with Jesus right about the same time. I was devastated, and I tried to win her back. And I tried. And I tried. And I tried.

I also tried to win her back to Jesus. And I tried. And I tried. And I tried. In a last-ditch, hope-against-hope power play, I wrote a marathon letter, a typewritten, stream-of-consciousness masterpiece in which I articulated all sorts of reasons, big and small, why she should come back to Jesus.

Only later did I come to realize what I was doing: I was trying to control her by forcing the good things of the kingdom on her. My interest in her spiritual life was wrapped up in my interest in winning her back. Needless to say, she didn't appreciate my efforts. All I remember from her response to my letter is this: "Not good."

I hope she threw the letter away.

Bad stuff into good stuff

Don't try to control people. Don't condemn. Don't force. If you really want to be concerned about such matters, the log in your own eye—your own sin and your own inability to respond to the good things of the kingdom—is more than enough to keep you occupied. But always remember, and never forget, there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

As a parent, I find these words of Jesus especially challenging. But as I sit with them, I also find them especially helpful, even liberating. As a parent, there's only so much I can do. More to the point, there's only so much I should do. Mostly, I want my children to follow Jesus. I can pray at all times. I can be sensitive to the Spirit so that I can instruct at appropriate times and in appropriate ways. If I see their specks, do I also

see my log? I must confess my sins to them. I must say, "I'm sorry." Some children grow up never hearing those words from their parents.

Are you fearful about what certain people are doing, all the foghorn-blowing fools and heavy-thumbed butchers? Are you fearful about developments in our world? Are you worried about the progressive left? Are you worried about the religious right? Are you worried about both the progressive left and the religious right?

Remember what Jesus says just prior to the Sermon on the Mount: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). With the coming of Christ and the Spirit, the healing, loving rule of God has drawn near. We pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," and we know that God will answer that prayer (Matthew 6:10).

One of the greatest aspects of the kingdom of heaven, which I never tire of preaching (though you may tire of hearing me preach it!), is that God uses evil for good. Do you want to condemn people who are doing bad things? Do you want to force good things on unreceptive people? You don't know how God will turn bad stuff into good stuff. But if you are a citizen of the kingdom, you know that he will. God is assuring us, "I've got this."

A few weeks ago, I was talking with a woman, not the church-going type, who out of the blue quoted Jesus' words in this passage: "Do not judge." I was stunned, not least because it was from the very passage I would be preaching next. What are the odds? I took it that our appointment was divine.

She wasn't preaching to me; she was preaching to herself. She noted her tendency earlier in her life to judge other people but also noted how well things have turned out. Don't judge, she was saying, because you don't know the future; things may well turn out for the best.

If someone who isn't inclined toward the Scriptures can live by Jesus' words, how much more should we? How much more should I?

Is there something or someone or some people that you're trying to control right now, maybe through condemnation, maybe through forcing things? Is trying to stay in control controlling you? Let it go. God's got this.

Endnotes

1. Robert Farrar Capon, *The Third Peacock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 183.com/2016/10/16/life-hard/
2. Although we will all stand before God, Paul assures us, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1, 14:10).
3. C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1968), 89.

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