

The Helpfulness of Correction

Good morning everybody. If you have a bible, go ahead and turn with me to [Matthew 7](#). If you're new around City Church, here on Sundays we have been working our way, little-by-little through the [book of Matthew](#). And specifically right now, we're in a portion of Matthew often called "the sermon on the mount." In it, Jesus is working his way through various parts of our lives as followers of Jesus and helping us think about it all from the perspective of something he calls "the kingdom of heaven."

And in today's passage, we come across a [widely known saying](#) from Jesus—and I'm referring mainly to the first half of v. 1, "do not judge." *Most people*, Christian or not, at least here in America, are at least *aware* that Jesus said something like that. [A friend of mine is fond of saying that this is the one verse in the bible that even non-Christians have memorized](#). Most everyone is aware that Jesus said not to judge. But while a lot of people know that Jesus said that, *not* a lot of people know exactly what he *meant* when he said that. You see, just because a verse in the bible is well-known, [doesn't necessarily mean it's well-understood](#). And that's probably the case with this particular teaching of Jesus.

I think [it is often assumed](#) that "do not judge" [means something like "don't make moral assessments](#) of other people." I think that is what a lot of people think Jesus meant. And a lot of people are big *fans* of that interpretation, because it seems to play right into our *cultural* value of *tolerance*. *Tolerance* is the belief that morality, at the end of the day, is relative—every individual person just has to figure out what right and wrong is for *themselves*. And if that's true, none of us have any right to impose *our* definition of right and wrong on *other* people. That, it is thought, is "judging" them.

But [let's think about that](#) for a second. Because if "making moral assessments of other people" is wrong, nobody ever told Jesus that. Jesus makes moral assessments of people *constantly*. In the last chapter of Matthew, he just finished calling people *hypocrites repeatedly* because they did good things simply to be seen by other people doing them. In today's passage, he's going to call people *hypocrites* yet again. In some ways, the entire sermon on the mount that we've been covering is Jesus making moral assessments, one after another, and then "*imposing*" his moral instructions and standards on other people. So **if when he says "do not judge," Jesus meant "don't make moral assessments of other people," he either suffered from short-term amnesia, or was just very bad at following his own teaching.** And I personally don't think either of those things are true of Jesus. Which means he must've meant something else.

So **what *did* Jesus mean** when he said “do not judge”? If he’s not saying “don’t make moral assessments of other people,” what *is* he saying? Here’s how I’d put it, and then we’ll work through the passage and unpack it all in detail. **This passage is about *how you correct other people*.**

So it’s **not really about *whether*** you make a moral assessment of another person—it’s about what you do with that moral assessment. It’s a passage about *how you approach* that other person with your assessment of them. There’s a posture towards correcting other people that is *helpful* and *beneficial* to them, and another posture that simply speaks to talk down to and *condemn* them. And Jesus is saying there is a way to do the former without being *guilty* of the latter. That’s what he’s trying to draw out when he says “do not judge.”

So let’s take a look. **Matthew 7**, starting in v. 1:

[1] Judge not, that you be not judged. [2] For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

So Jesus starts off with a **guiding principle** for how we correct other people, and here’s the principle: *with the judgment you pronounce, you will be judged. With the measure you use, it will be measured to you.* Generally, Jesus says, **the way you treat other people is the way they will end up treating you.** The judgment you pronounce is likely the judgment that you’ll receive. If you are compassionate and patient and gracious in correcting others, others will likely be compassionate and patient and gracious towards you. If you are harsh and condescending and self-righteous towards others, they’ll be all of those same things towards you when the roles are reversed.

So **anytime you prepare to correct** another person, one the first questions you ask should be “if I were in their situation, how would *I* want to be corrected on this?” And you let *that thinking* guide your posture towards *them*. In the book of Galatians, the apostle Paul, likely thinking of Jesus’ very words here in Matthew 7, put it *this way* (and I find this language really helpful):

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. (But) keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.¹

¹ Galatians 6:1

Here it says if anyone you know is “caught in a transgression”—if there’s something in their life they’re not seeing clearly, if there’s a blindspot they have in regards to their life or their character—that we as that person’s brother or sister *should* “restore them.” In other words, we should see it as our *responsibility to engage* them on whatever that issue is. *But*, Paul says, we should do it “in a *spirit of gentleness*,” and that we should “keep watch on ourselves, lest we also be tempted.” Now why would he say that?

Here I think is **why**. **There’s something about the process of engaging another follower of Jesus on their sin that just lends itself towards pride and arrogance on our part—or in Jesus’ words, *judgmentalism***. And it’s not hard to realize why. If you see something off in another person’s life that they don’t see, it’s easy to see yourself as better than them, just by nature of the situation. After all, you see something in their life that *they don’t see*. So Paul says that while having those types of conversations is a good, needed thing to do, it can also be a dangerous thing to do at a *personal* level...because it would be easy to become conceited and puffed up with pride about what you’re doing. The natural inclination is to think of yourself as just a little better than the person you’re correcting. **And that mentality can be deadly when it comes to the conversation going well.**

And **Jesus is about to illustrate why that is** next in our passage. And he’s going to do it by way of a very **colorful illustration**. Take a look with me, picking it back up in v. 3:

*[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**? [4] 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? [5] 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**.*

So let’s break down this situation a little. *First*, it’s **important to realize that in the scenario Jesus lays out here, both people are followers of Jesus**. Did you catch that? I say that because Jesus uses the phrase “your brother” to describe the other person three different times in this passage. “Brother” for Jesus was a gender-neutral term to describe any other person within the community of faith. Another *follower of Jesus*, that you’re in relationship with.

“In those situations,” he says, “**why is it** that you see the *speck* in the other person’s eye, but you don’t see the *log* in your own eye?” The word *speck* is likely what it sounds like. It’s a piece of dust, a particle of sawdust stuck in someone’s eye. The word for *log* is also what it sounds like: essentially, a 2x4. So it’s easy for us to miss for a lot of reasons, but

Jesus here is actually being funny here. Like this would've been met with some giggles from the crowd when he said it.

And the best way I know to show it to you is to just **act it out**, exactly like Jesus intended for people to imagine it. So I need a second person—can I get a volunteer who's willing to come up on stage with me? Awesome. Okay, you're going to be the brother who has a speck in their eye. I didn't know how to make a piece of dust *visible* to the rest of you guys, so instead of sawdust, we're going to do a piece of glitter. I won't make you put it in your eye, but just take this piece of glitter and put it somewhere right under your eye. Got it? Okay, so you have a piece of glitter in your eye.

And **I'm your friend**—I'm another follower of Jesus in relationship with you—and I want to *help* you get that glitter *out* of your eye (or *off of*, as it were), so I'm going to do just that. But unfortunately, I have a bit...of...a *problem*. Because I have *this* coming out of my eye. And so every time I try to get close enough to help you with your glitter, I can't...quite...get...close...enough...to be helpful. Because of the log. It's a real predicament.

So **Jesus says**, "**why is it** that you see the *speck* (or the glitter) in your brother's eye so clearly and so easily, but you don't see the *log* in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, "hey—you've got some glitter in your eye, and it's a *really good thing* that I'm here, because I am really well equipped to get glitter out of your eye. I'm an expert at it in fact. So let me very meticulously get this glitter out of your eye." Jesus says why are you trying to do that when you have a *log* in your *own* eye?

Instead, Jesus says, you need to first remove the *log* from your eye, and then you'll see clearly to remove the dust from the other person's eye. Now all of a sudden, you are much better equipped to be helpful and beneficial to the other person. Because you no longer run the risk of clobbering them with the 2x4. I won't *complete* the metaphor by tending to _____'s eye right now on stage—that'd be quite an intimate moment—but you get the idea. Okay, everybody give him a hand as he goes back to his seat. Also somebody might want to help him—he's got some glitter in his eye.

Okay, so do you see what Jesus is doing here? So the question, then, is **what is the log?** What does that represent, in the illustration? Well, I think it could be a lot of things. It could be your own sins, your own struggles that are unrelated to the scenario. It could be an area of *your own* life where you aren't seeking and experiencing God's forgiveness and grace, that makes you in turn very harsh and impatient towards others. But here's what I think Jesus is saying: I think he's saying the **judgmentalism itself** is the log. The log is the fact that you are approaching this scenario feeling superior to the other person,

because you noticed something off in their life that they didn't notice. Jesus is saying that if you don't deal with *that* sort of *arrogant posture* in your *own heart* before you have the conversation, you won't be able to be helpful at all to the other person. And you might end up being outright harmful to the other person.

So listen: **some of you wonder why it never goes well** when you engage your **spouse** on a sin issue of theirs. Some of you wonder why it never goes well when you correct a **roommate** about something that is off in their life. Some of you wonder why every time you talk to another **person in your LifeGroup** about a sin issue, the conversation is just a complete trainwreck. And for a lot of you, *this* is why. It's because you come into the conversation guns-a-blazing ready to nitpick and hyper-focus on every aspect of that person's life that isn't good enough. Or you come in to correct them on a relatively minor issue, but you come in with a *tone* like you're trying to confront them about murdering someone. And it feels like those conversations never go well—you throw out phrases like “well I guess they just don't know how to accept tough love!” And maybe that's the case. But it also *might* just be that you're a jerk, and you're using phrases like “tough love” to keep from admitting that you're a bit of a jerk.

And it might be that it never goes well because **you think you're being helpful** to the other person, and you actually are effectively clobbering them over the head with your harshness and condescension. **Your self-righteousness is causing more damage to the other person than the speck in their eye ever was.**

So Jesus is saying **if you truly want to be helpful**, you need to take the log out of your eye first. You need to go before God and maybe before other people in your life and go “okay I know there's this thing in my brother's eye, but I've also got this problem where I think I'm better than them because I see it and they don't. And that's wrong, and that's off, and I want to confess that so that I can be rid of it, receive grace and forgiveness from Jesus through the Holy Spirit, and then I can be helpful to my friend that has something in their eye.” That's the solution. That's how you gain the ability to correct another follower of Jesus in a helpful way. We could put it this way: **followers of Jesus deal with their own sin first, so they can be helpful to others.**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that there are *three stages* of Christian spiritual maturity. The first stage is when you are disgusted by everyone *else's* sin. The second stage is when you are disgusted by your own sin. And the third, final stage is when you re-enter the community of God as a person who has received incredible grace for *your* sins, and stands ready to offer the same incredible grace to others for *their* sins. *That's* what we're shooting for in how we relate to each other. Does that make sense?

Now, **with all of that unpacked**, I do just want to point out: **the goal is still to help the other person** get the dust out of their eye. Right? Jesus doesn't say "don't worry about the other person's sin, you just need to worry about *your* sin." He says clearly in v. 5, "...*then you will see clearly* to take the speck out of your brother's eye." So don't take away from all this that until you are morally perfect and don't struggle with anything at all, you can't address sin in someone else's life. That's not his point. His point is simply this: that **every time we go to correct a brother or sister about their sin, it should automatically trigger this process in us of examining ourselves first**. Casting aside any self-righteousness, any condescension, any judgment in us, so that we can be helpful to the other person.

And **when it's done that way**, what we *should* find in the *other* follower of Jesus is **receptiveness**. A receptive posture to the thing in their life we're trying to address. Put another way, **followers of Jesus welcome and appreciate being corrected**. I'll say that again for the people in the back: **followers of Jesus welcome and appreciate being corrected**. I get this from a lot of different places in the bible, but *especially* from the book of Proverbs. I'll give you just *one* example for time's sake:

Proverbs 12:1:

Whoever loves discipline (or we might say, *correction*) **loves knowledge, whoever hates correction is stupid.**

Now, before we go any further in this teaching, I just want to point out that **I would never call you stupid**. The bible *might have* though. What this verse is saying is that the person who welcomes and invites and appreciates correction is wise—they love *knowledge*. But the one who *hates* correction—the one who wars against it and gets defensive and writes it off and bites back at the person who gives it—*that person* is a fool.

Here's **the way it works**. If you are a follower of Jesus, the *assumption* is that you *understand* you have blind spots. You *get* that there are things about yourself you don't see clearly. And *therefore*, that you need *help* from other followers of Jesus to see and recognize what those things are. And you *need* that so that you can become who God made you to be. 1 Timothy is going to say that you need correction "...so that you might be *complete* and *equipped for every good work*." **If no one ever corrects you, you can't be who you're made to be**. Because correction is one primary means by which God forms us into his image over time.

So when a person comes to you and brings correction (with a humble posture), you respond with a *receptive* Spirit. You respond with gratitude that they would be willing to risk a difficult conversation to benefit you. You respond by *welcoming* and *appreciating* it,

because you understand that you *need* it. (Now, notice **I didn't say you enjoy it**. Like I'm not saying you need to jump with joy that someone is engaging you on your sin.) But I am saying you receive it with a willing and listening Spirit. You ask questions and you fight to hear what they're saying, even if you don't like *that* or *how* they're saying it. Because that is how we become complete, equipped for every good work. You welcome and appreciate correction because you see the inherent *value* in it.

But *that* I think **feeds us right into this little odd verse** about **dogs and pigs and pearls**. Because **while correction from a fellow follower of Jesus is of incredible value, that doesn't mean that everyone can perceive its value**. There are people in the world who don't yet have the framework to welcome and appreciate correction. And I think *that's* what Jesus gets at in v. 6. So just read it with me, and then we'll talk for a bit about what it means exactly. Verse 6...

[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."*

So what in the world is Jesus saying here? Well let's **start with the basics**. Here are the basics: there are different forms of *life* on planet earth. One of the most basic forms of life that we're all familiar with is a plant. Welcome to biology class I guess (just go with me—I promise this is going somewhere). A plant is a *living* organism, and it responds to "food" (like soil and water). If it receives that "food," it will respond overtime by growing and becoming more and more healthy. But a plant can't *anticipate* the value of that food. A tree doesn't get excited and start clapping its limbs together because it sees rain coming on the horizon.

You know **what form of life does** know how to anticipate and get excited about food? *Dogs*. Dogs know exactly what it looks and sounds like when their owners walk up with food, or get out the container of treats, and they proceed to lose their minds over it. As any dog-owner can attest to. **But at the same time, if you were to take out a pearl necklace or a diamond ring** and put it in front of a hungry dog, what do you think would happen? They'd probably either stare at it very confused, or depending on how *hungry* they were, *try* to eat it and then grow even more impatient and frustrated at *you* for giving them something that can not be eaten. If they were a *wild* hungry animal, like the ones Jesus has in mind, they might turn and attack *you* for giving them something they can't eat. And here's **why they respond that way**: **they don't have the ability to perceive the value of what you offered them**. *Are pearls valuable? Yes, very valuable. Is the diamond ring valuable? Very.* But certain recipients don't have the ability to *perceive* the value.

So here I think is all Jesus is saying: **if you offer biblical correction to someone who can't perceive its value, it may not go well.** They may, in Jesus' language, "trample it under their feet, and turn and attack you." Because when you offer biblical correction to someone, you're operating under the assumption that they see the world like you do, and that they have the framework for *why* that correction is desired and helpful. But if they don't follow Jesus, that may not be true of them. What you are offering them *may be* good and true and helpful, but they don't have the lenses to see it that way yet.

So **let's say you have a friend** who doesn't follow Jesus. And this friend is constantly hopping from relationship to relationship, getting romantically and sexually involved in each one. And let's say you know about this and you want to talk to them about it. So you sit down to coffee with them and just launch into all the reasons that it is unwise and morally wrong, about how it's not what God wants with their life, and you tell them that Scripture says doing that is wrong. You try to *correct* them, in other words. How is that conversation going to *go*, most likely? Not great, right? They're going to feel judged and condemned, and there's at least a decent chance they might get very angry and upset with *you* as a result. They might actually flip things on you and start going after things in *your* life that *they* think aren't okay. They may "turn and attack *you*."

Now, **is what you're offering them true**, from a biblical perspective? Yep. Is it valuable and helpful correction? Technically speaking, *yes*. But it's going to be hard for them to see it that way, because they're probably going to feel judged and condemned and shamed, rather than *helped*. And here's why: because **they don't have the framework for why you're telling them all those things.** From their perspective, you're just telling them that all the places that they're currently trying to find life and joy and happiness are *wrong*. And that's hard for them to get on board with without first knowing *where that life can be found instead*.

So **instead**, what if you used that time with them to just **unpack for them the gospel?** What if you unpacked for them the good news of Jesus, and how for *you*, that has offered *you* life that is better and more lasting than all of the other things *you* were inclined to look for life in? And what if you then were to spend time praying that they respond to that conversation with curiosity about who *Jesus* is? That **eventually, they get to the point where they can perceive the value of the wisdom and correction you want to offer.** But it has to start with them understanding the *gospel*.

And really, **that's where it starts for all of us**, right? With an understanding of the *gospel*? I don't know if you've ever thought about it this way, but **the good news of Jesus comes to all of us in the form of loving confrontation.** It's *confrontation* in the way that it says to us, in no uncertain terms: *the way that you're living is not okay. The things*

you're finding your hope in, your value in, your identity in right now—those things are not where life is found. That's confrontational language. The cross *itself* is *confrontational*—it says vividly, “this is how big of a deal your sin is.” The message of the gospel is *confrontational* at its core.

But at the same time, it **isn't just any confrontation**. It's **loving confrontation**. Jesus *doesn't* come to us and say “unless you change your behavior and actions, I'm done with you. And you better figure out how to shape up and live better, or we're done here.” That's not it. Rather, he comes to us through the cross, with nail-scarred hands and says “the way you're viewing life and self and reality is off, and it can not bring life. But in my death, I have made a way for you. I have taken onto myself your sins, your faults, your failures, and your destructive behavior and all of its effects. And I've dealt with it already. I've put it onto my shoulders and carried it to the cross.

“And if you'll let me,” Jesus says, “**I will walk with you** through the difficult process of finding freedom and healing from those things. I will walk with you as you put away the *old* you and learn to live into the *new* you that is now possible. I'm not here to condemn you and write you off—I'm here to tell you the *truth* and walk with you as you find a better way forward.”

The gospel at its *core* is **loving confrontation**. And **when you realize that, it changes the way you confront and correct other people**. Because you're no longer just the person who needs to *correct* others—you're also one who needed and *still* needs *correction*. Which means you're not over and above and better than the other person. You're the *same* as them. Sure, your sin may look different on the surface. You may struggle with different things and struggle in different ways. But you are precisely the same in that you needed loving confrontation, and you received it as a gift through the cross of Jesus. Which enables you then to *offer that same loving confrontation* to others.

And **from that same perspective**, if you are on the **receiving end** of correction from another follower of Jesus, the gospel is what enables you to *receive* it. You can receive it because you see other people's correction as a means through which the loving confrontation of Jesus flows towards you. You see it as the gift that it is.

So let's just land here. I've got **three questions** for you to reflect on going forward, to really investigate whether or not we are putting into practice this teaching from Jesus:

- **Is there anyone you are avoiding correcting, even though you know it would be helpful?** Has the Holy Spirit given you a window into some aspect of a brother or sister's life that needs addressing? Have you spotted something that is off, and have both the relationship and the ability to address it? Because remember: as

that person's brother or sister, you have a *responsibility* to help them become more like Jesus. So putting it off is not just valuing comfort too much—it's actually withholding something good from the other person. It's *sinning* against them. Second...

- **How are you planning to deal with your sin and self-righteousness first?** What is your plan to “get the log out of your own eye”? Put another way, what is your *posture* towards that conversation that you need to have? Are you sinfully *excited* about it, because it means you get to feel superior to the other person for a moment? Or are you thankful that you get to *help* another follower of Jesus? If it's the former, what are you going to do to correct that *in yourself* before conversation happens? And lastly...
- **Are you appreciating and welcoming correction from others?** Lastly, if you're in the room and you would *call yourself* a follower of Jesus, can I just ask: do you perceive the *value* of receiving correction and wisdom from others? When someone engages you on something off in your life, do you receive it and welcome it? Or do you respond with defensiveness or justifying yourself or explaining them away, or just ignoring it? Because if your default response always is to *reject* it in some way, or even *attack* the people offering it, *Jesus' assessment* of you would be that you may not actually be following Jesus.

Because **a follower of Jesus welcomes, appreciates and offers** wisdom and correction. They ask for it, they *receive* it as the gift that it is, and they *offer* it with a humble and helpful spirit. They see it as a necessary part of their discipleship, to both give and receive correction with grace and humility. That's the goal. Let me pray for us.