

A Branding Issue (Part Two)

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged”

Reflection 7 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

When Jesus in his day urged his people not to judge, he was fighting for the survival of those people whose smoldering rage was slowly driving them toward fatal confrontation with the power of Rome. But something even deeper is going on, and I do not mean to suggest that the Sermon on the Mount was a speech simply against Jewish terrorism, first-century style. Jesus all the way through this text is appealing to universal truths, drawing on the wisdom of the centuries, seeking to transform core human character where all the problems start in the first place.

So when he advocates not judging, he draws on a Greek word that has as one of its meanings “to express an opinion about, especially in an unfavorable sense.” In this, Jesus is very Eastern in his thinking. Not surprisingly. He is teaching us to not have an opinion at all about certain things, to just let them be, to just accept certain things as mysteries. He is cautioning us against our universal knee-jerk impulse to judge everything, to make hair-trigger responses to what we first see or hear without carefully evaluating all the facts that make up the whole picture. Social scientists tell us that we are always automatically and instantaneously weighing and evaluating everything we see and hear and experience. We have almost no neutral perceptions. Everything we see or hear or experience we assign a value to. In our minds, it’s good or bad. Immediately. These unconscious likes and dislikes are lightning quick, and since they occur outside our awareness, we assume that they are neutral and can be trusted. But in fact we have all these spontaneous unthinking likes and dislikes in us that are not at all neutral.

Our minds are impartial about nothing, and they make all these judgments in seconds with little or no factual evidence. And Jesus is saying: Stop these unthinking likes and dislikes. Take a second look. Seek to really understand. Be merciful, be forgiving, be trusting, and judge not. Do not brand. Our world can be a happier place. And safer.

Realize that often your thoughts are just that – thoughts. Stop. Look. See. Just watch your thoughts. Just watch them. Watch them rise as impulses in your mind and then fade away. See that they have a life of their own. They are not just the facts, they are your thoughts. You do not have to be ruled by them. Your worst fears are just thoughts. Your biggest worries are just thoughts. Your dislike for someone, or your frustration with someone, is when all is said and done just a thought.

So quit labeling and classifying and pigeonholing (or shoehorning) life into neat little boxes when the truth is that the real world is not “neat.” Life is filled with ambiguity and complexity. And in light of that, Jesus is calling us to a higher logic, to a higher perspective that transcends simplistic, either-or thinking, a logic that is more flexible, that allows for multiple interpretations and possibilities, and that is consequently true to the way life really is. We all know that when we evaluate our own circumstances we see the complexity. We see the color. Jesus is saying when you evaluate others, quit seeing them in simplistic ways, in black and white. Extend to others the grace you know you need yourself.

Jesus is saying: Let's start at the beginning, where the trouble starts. Do not judge. Instead of falling back on all your automatic, unconsidered likes and dislikes, seek first to understand. Stop. Look. See. And this doesn't mean to stop thinking. It means really for the first time to start thinking well, to think clearly with balance and perspective, to see the whole picture, to consider possibilities that may at first make us uncomfortable, to consider some things that maybe our in-group doesn't quite get yet, to make wise and ethical discernments. In fact, it is often when we quit forcing things, when we relax and let things be, that we can finally see the truth.

You see, Jesus was creating back then and is still creating today, a new humanity slow to anger, not given to unthinking retaliation, quick to forgive, able to love even our enemies, and not judging. He is saying on behalf of children whose spirits are being crushed by over-critical parents or teachers or coaches, "Do not brand." He is saying on behalf of confused young women in crisis pregnancies, "Do not brand." We cannot forget that our abortion culture has its roots in fundamentalists' harsh rejections of crisis pregnancies. Enlarge your perspective. He is saying on behalf of those who do not look like us, or act like us, or think like us, "Do not brand." He is saying that to us in America and he is saying that to angry young men in the back streets of Islamabad. He is saying on behalf of national leaders whom we instinctively do not like for reasons that are not, on closer look, that clear to us, "Do not brand." He is saying on behalf of those we cannot understand, whose behavior we find bizarre, "Do not brand." Seek only to understand. They have their life story too. If you only knew it, you might applaud. But do not brand. And when we get this, we ourselves will not be branded. The church will no longer have a branding issue.

Jesus is offering to take us from the world into which we were born into a larger and kinder world. He is offering us a new world in the morning, and through us a great global spiritual awakening. It's going back to what Jesus was doing when he first delivered his Sermon on the Mount to his own people on the edge of a great national catastrophe. It's what he is still doing now in our blood-soaked, fearful, terrorized world. He offers to take us from the world as we have made it into a larger and kinder world. It takes new birth, including learning to think in different ways, becoming conscious of our unthinking likes and dislikes, suspending our hair-trigger impulses to judge, learning higher perspective more true to reality. And if we will accept this new birth, he offers us new life, new possibilities, a whole new world.

– Dale Pauls