

Luke 6:37-45  
Who Gets the Last Word  
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John Ortberg tells a story about a man named Hank. Hank had been a Christian for 50 years. By the time I came to pastor Hank's church, he was an old cranky guy. He had been a member there since he was a young cranky guy.

Hank complained about his family, he complained about his job, and one day, he began to complain about the church's music. He stopped people in the church lobby—visitors, strangers—and said, "Don't you think the music in this church is too loud?" We sat him down and told him he had to stop that. I figured that was the end of it.

Several weeks later, I got a visit from a man from OSHA, the government agency that oversees safety in workplaces. I wondered, *Why is someone from OSHA here to see me?* He began explaining dangerous decibel levels at airports and rock concerts. Then I realized what had happened. Hank couldn't get satisfaction anywhere else, so he called OSHA to report that the church's music was too loud!

I started laughing. I apologized to the OSHA agent for making light of the situation, but it just struck me as silly. The agent said, "You think you feel silly? Do you have any idea how much abuse I've taken at OSHA since everyone found out I was busting a church?" Fifty years in the church hadn't brought a smile to Hank. He was just as grumpy as he had always been, maybe more.

**Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; <sup>38</sup> give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you."**

**<sup>39</sup> He also told them a parable: "Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit? <sup>40</sup> A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher. <sup>41</sup> 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? <sup>42</sup> How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye.**

**"For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit,<sup>44</sup> for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. <sup>45</sup> The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.**

Sometimes the most compassionate thing a person can do is prevent another person from doing something they may regret one day.

Last week we looked at the very difficult topic our Lord addresses of how we are to treat our enemies. I ended by sharing a story about the German Theologian and Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was one of the most important leaders in the Church's resistance of Hitler's Third Reich. Bonhoeffer began his ministry as a Christian committed to non-violent resistance, but when he saw the horrors taking place all around him he changed his mind, joining the efforts to overthrow Hitler, in an effort to preserve the lives of countless persecuted people. After accepting a teaching assignment in the States, Bonhoeffer said shortly after arriving: "unless I live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany, I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war."

As we listen to the words of our Lord, one of the marvelous and challenging aspects of the Christian Faith is the ability to see and hear Jesus through an interpretive lens (the fancy theological term is to have a hermeneutic, a way of interpreting Scripture in our lives). Reading the Scriptures, we develop the ability to hear the word and work within the framework of God's big story of God's redemption and salvation in the world. We might call this the ability to interpret the Spirit of the Word and the Letter of the Word.

In last week's passage Jesus says: **Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.** At first glance this feels like he is inviting us to be religious push-overs, sort of amorphous and all too willing to be taken advantage of. But if you continue you can see the whole picture of his teaching more clearly. He concludes verses 32-36 by saying, "Listen if you only ever interact with people who are just like you, who think and talk and act just like you, what good is it?" Jesus is inviting us to engage with those whom we disagree, but to do so in a way that reveals a different way, and brings a little saltiness to their lives. The willingness to engage our enemies—even if it means we take a few lumps—is held in tension with the warning against what I call the huddle and cuddle mentality of the church.

In Matthew's account he says salt that isn't used loses its saltiness. If the salt never leaves the comfortable confines of a carefully constructed communities, and it's always sheltered from all who might be different from it, what good is it? Bonhoeffer joined that group of Christians who engaged the effort to change their country in an effort to preserve it.

Today we continue in Jesus' teaching how he is molding his followers to be in the world. As I said just a few minutes ago, sometimes the most compassionate thing a person can do is keep another from doing something terrible that they might regret. Here Jesus fences us in by saying: **Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not and you will not be condemned; forgive and you will be forgiven; give and it will be given to you...For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.**

Jesus is not saying that we shouldn't have moral or ethical stances. He is not saying that we should have a kind of "I'm alright, you're alright, we're all alright" attitude. The bible makes very clear that God puts earthly powers in place to be obeyed. Jesus elsewhere will say, render to Caesar what is Caesar, meaning give to the earthly powers the parts of you they require: taxes, service, goodwill. But give to God the most important thing, your heart and your ultimate trust. Paul says in Romans 13:1-2 "Let all people be subject to the governing authorities, because they've been put there by God."

But Jesus is saying that when it comes to the matters of another person's heart, another person's life, don't judge. They are a work in progress, just like you are a work in progress. This is, I think, one of the most important teachings that we need help in following, because you know how easy it is to drink in those delicious and dangerous conversations about others. Did you hear about so and so, I saw them down at Blooey's? I thought they were a Christian. Or, guess who I saw going into Taco Bell the other day, aren't they on a diet? This would be very difficult for me because I love Taco Bell. Or did you hear that so and so just lost their job?

I wonder if it was because of...

I knew that...

Let's be really cautious when we're letting them near a leadership position in our church...

Gossip and self-righteous judgment, it goes down so smoothly, but Jesus is warning us here, don't drink it, it is nothing but poison.

The truth of our lives is that we are all a work in progress, and judging others is akin to scoffing at God's work in their lives. Author James Bryan Smith writes that "when we judge others we are participating in deconstruction without reconstruction." Mother Theresa says: "if you judge people, you have no time to love them." Do you really think that you have the last word on someone?

When you think about this it really is an absurd thought. Jesus knew this too. It's why he paints for his listeners this comically absurd picture of a person who approaches another to tell them about the speck in their eye, when they themselves have a log in their own. Jesus has a great sense of humor, I think this is another example of Jesus getting a laugh while he's teaching his disciples. The meaning of the speck and the log is not that one person has little sin and another has big sin, and if the man with the big sin could just get rid of the log, then he could help the other person. No, what's so funny about this image is the size of the log that is so clearly obstructing this person's vision, but they themselves have no idea it's there. This is the subtle danger of judging another, we do not see the enormity of our need in comparison.

Jesus is teaching here that judging another is a fool's errand. Do you really want to stand on your own righteousness and pronounce a judgement on another? Do you really want to use your own criteria for judging another? Do you really think you have ground to stand upon? Because with a moment of self-reflection we will realize how much bigger our issues are in comparison to the one you are pointing out in another.

But the second, and I think more important lesson from this text is Jesus' invitation to a deeper experience of spiritual formation. When we choose to entrust the lives and the judgments of others to God, we acknowledge that it is Christ who ultimately sits on the throne of their lives. And not only in their life, but mine as well. The God who, as Scripture says, created and knows every fiber of our being and hair on our head, invites you and I to have such confidence in Christ's ongoing work of salvation that we don't have to worry about assigning judgment to another. That deep trust that God is ultimately in control, removes our need to judge, and sets us free to joyfully love and serve others in the strength of the Spirit of Christ who lives in us.

Finally, Jesus states very clearly that we are given a limitation on judging others. But that same limitation is also given in our judging of ourselves. We do not have the last word about someone

else, and we definitely don't have the last word about ourselves. Be careful in how you think about your own life, don't get too down on yourself, don't write yourself off, Jesus hasn't.

When I was a youth minister in New Jersey I had a chance to get to know a guy named Zach. Zach called one day and asked if I would meet him for coffee. When we got together he poured his heart out about how depressed he was, how worthless he felt, I even worried that he was suicidal. He told me about how bleak his life was, and how his life was in such shambles. And I remember having a moment where I just out of the blue said: read this text. It was Luke 6:37. Read it for me and tell me what it says to you. And so he read it, judge not, you will not be judged. He said, yeah we really shouldn't judge others, that's a bad thing to do.

And I said, doesn't that apply to you too? How do you have the right to have the last word about yourself?

This is what Jesus is warning us about. Don't get into this trap, you don't want to be the last word on yourself. And this is what Zach was doing, he was deciding that he had the last word about his life.

CS Lewis has this whimsical quote, he was asked once about the subject of Hell, and this is what he said: Hell is when the last voice you hear is your own. Not God's. As long as God is talking to you, you're not in Hell. Even if he's scolding you, you're not in Hell. You're in hell when at an infinite distance from every other person, and the only one you can hear is you. Jeff was a small country, boundary on the north south east and west by Jeff. Hell is utter loneliness, outer darkness, where the last word you hear is your own. Do you want the last word about you to be yours?

Zach thought that his was the last word about himself, and that why he felt so completely depressed. He had nothing good to say about himself. But I told him that we don't have to have the last word, I'd rather let Jesus have the last word. Because he's good. Jesus is not worried about protecting his honor, I am. He's not worried about winning the argument, I am. So I'd rather trust him to have the last word.

Paul picks this up in Romans 8 when he says who is in a position to condemn, who has the right to say the last word? Is it Jesus Christ? Yes, and he is the one who is our mediator. He lived for us, he died for us, he is risen for us, and he intercedes for us. And then this passage ends with this majestic statement: For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The final word is Jesus Christ, not myself, not about me, nor anyone else. And Jesus, by his Holy Spirit is still speaking his good word, and that's good news. Pray with me now as I read for us a pray from Martin Luther to close.

***O Lord God, heavenly Father, who in thy son has given to mankind a pioneer of salvation, and made him the true and eternal priest, the mediator of his people.***