

Foundations for Healthy Christian Community

Luke 6:37-42

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A Christian is a person in fellowship with the Father, and the Son, by the ministry of the Spirit. Consider the wonder of what I just said! If you are in Christ, you are in familial fellowship within the community of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This means there is an intimacy of fellowship such as exists in a family. You belong to God's household. Peter says Christians have been made "partakers of the divine nature" (II Peter 1:4). John also exults in this, saying, "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!" (I John 3:1). Now, because you are children of God by nature, doesn't it make sense also that you would bear certain characteristics of the divine family?

And that is precisely what Jesus is teaching in this Sermon on the Plain—how to walk and talk and live like the Father, and like the incarnate Son, Jesus of Nazareth.

For instance, we have learned we are to be merciful even as our heavenly Father is merciful. "Be like your Father" says Jesus (Luke 6:35-36). And in today's text, we discover Jesus himself is the disciple's only true measure of spiritual progress—we are to be like him, and not celebrity preachers or spiritual superstars. So, there we have it. Discipleship 101 begins with the determination to walk as Jesus walked, to be among the blessed and not as those upon whom he pronounces a woe (6:20-26). And you cannot have it both ways, no matter what the false prophets of our day tell you. It is the cruel deception of our time that one may confess Christ and live in accord with fleshly appetites and worldly values.

And this presents an important question:

If progress in Christlike character were the measure for whether one is a Christian or not, how many Christians would there be?

Now this question should not strike terror in the heart of any Christian, for the formation of Christlikeness ought to be a natural result of fellowship within Christ's church, just as physical and emotional development occur within a family. The challenge, of course, is finding healthy Christian community. In today's text, our Lord provides foundational principles for just such a community. That is to say, a community in which conformity to the image of Christ (discipleship) is the driving principle.

Now, please bear with me, for I must reiterate that community is not an option for the disciple of Christ. As Augustine said, "He who would have God as his Father, must accept the church as his mother." This means there is no path whereby one can fully realize the wholeness Christ died to bring *apart from* his living body, the church. No one thrives in isolation. This is

why when the sick or lame or aged cannot come to the church, the church must go to them. This is because the mystical union of Christ and his church is indissoluble. For while one cannot be certain to find Jesus in every group that calls itself a church, the fact remains no one will ever find him apart from the church. Salvation is communal as well as individual. God dwells among his people. The church is the body of Christ. We must therefore move beyond the popular notion that salvation is solely an individualistic matter, even a private thing. Jesus rarely addressed individuals; the common approach of our Lord was to address the group as though they were one. Blessed are “ye”—meaning “you all,” and so on.

And yet, many people choose to stay home on Sunday. But here we must be fair. If the only choices are stay home or attend a sick, worldly church, then stay home. For even church attendance is not an end unto itself. We seek out the church because therein is found the means of grace by which we grow up in Christ. And if people are not being nurtured, exhorted, and admonished to formation in Christ, why should they attend?

So then, what role do we each play in forming and maintaining a healthy community?

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Jesus continues his foundational teaching in discipleship by stating, “Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” If I judge you, I will be judged. How can this be? It is because we are members one with another. Because we are each in Christ, I cannot judge you without judging myself. I cannot condemn you, without condemning myself. But on a positive note, when I forgive you, I come to know forgiveness as well. To be in a trinitarian community means we develop relationships that reflect the love and beauty of the Trinity. The phrase, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” is not just a sacramental formula, it means you are immersed into a new way of living in community.

Whom am I to judge you? Who do I make myself out to be that I would condemn you? Instead, what defines healthy relationships is recognition of our mutual need for forgiveness. For “We all stumble in many ways,” (James 3:2). I am simply not qualified to act as your judge. What does it mean for me to judge someone? It means I claim to have the final word on you. To judge you means I know all about you and I claim to define you. And to condemn you means to deny you any hope of future redemption. You are what you have always been and you have no hope of change—simply because I said so. Yuck.

Can you see how to judge and condemn another is essentially playing God in another’s life? So, how are relationships to be characterized? By forgiveness. Forgiveness here stands in contrast to judging and condemning.

Discernment Still Applies

Now, please note: to stop judging and condemning does not mean we toss aside spiritual discernment. Discernment is a spiritual gift and we ought not quench the Spirit. An excellent example of discerning versus judging is found in our Lord's Sermon on the Mount. There Jesus says, "Judge not, that you be not judged," but then, he adds, "Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine" (Matthew 7:1, 6). To discern a "dog" or "swine" sounds harsh, but the Lord is not slandering people here, he is exhorting us to discern those who have no regard for holiness or the precious value of the kingdom of God—the pearl of great price (Matthew 13:45-46). Paul referred to false teachers as "dogs" (Philippians 3:2). There is a spiritual battle that is waged in the world between truth and falsehood, between shallow religiosity and holiness, and between that which is precious and that which is mundane.

Do not judge, and do not condemn, but also, do not be unwise in your choices when it comes to fellowship. "Do not be deceived" says the apostle Paul, "evil company corrupts good habits" (I Corinthians 15:33). We must be willing to discern evil in order to respond to this exhortation. And elsewhere, Paul warned "not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or reviler, or a drunkard, or extortioner—not even to eat with such a person" (I Corinthians 5:11). Within the same context of unruly people in the church, Paul was once warned, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." And so, he told his associate, Titus, "This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith" (Titus 1:12-13). While we have no right to judge and condemn another, we do have a responsibility to protect the church from evil behavior. Discernment is given to the church for such protection, and even rebuke is meant to be remedial, not condemning (II Corinthians 7:8-11; II Timothy 2:24-26).

Disciples are Givers

Healthy relationships in the church are characterized by forgiveness. We can make mistakes, and even sin against one another, and still find repentance and reconciliation. The Lord then tells us our interpersonal relationships in the church are to be marked by giving generously and freely. Good things happen to givers, not just in money, but in time and energy. Jesus says as we give, it will come back to us: "good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you." How you give is how you will receive. Once again, we are members one of another, and how I treat you will come back to me, for we are connected in Christ. Give then to one another, and give richly. Give freely. God is our source, and he himself gives to us all things richly to enjoy (II Timothy 6:17). A generous spirit is a godly spirit.

And listen to the apostolic ethic in Paul's words to the Ephesian elders:

³³ I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. ³⁵ I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:33-35).

Paul worked in order to provide for his necessities, and for those with him, and to care for the weak. Paul was a giver, not a taker. Paul did not arrive in town and demand offerings and tithes to support his apostolic ministry. Paul preached the kingdom of God in Ephesus. Dallas Willard taught the kingdom of God is entered through prayer and giving. The kingdom of God is a realm of plenty. We are to therefore to generous with others, never stingy. There is a big difference between being prudent and being miserly.

But do not allow this principle of giving ever become a tool for fanatics to manipulate you into giving more money than you can afford. This is not the point our Lord is making. We are to be givers, but this not a formula for prosperity. We do not give to get; we give because it is the blessed thing to do. Disciples are givers. The kingdom of God is a place of plenty. And we display this in our generosity.

Jesus is the Standard

Relationships in the church are to be characterized by forgiveness and giving. Our Lord continues his teaching into a third characteristic, humility, by use of a parable. Parables always have one central point. In this case, it is simply that the blind cannot lead the blind. If you think you are anyone's chief critic, chances are you are in denial of your own faults. We are not therefore to go about comparing ourselves with each other, lest we both fall into a ditch. Listen to what Paul told the spiritually proud Corinthians,

For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves are not wise (II Corinthians 10:12).

Our Lord is our supreme model and standard, and we ought to avoid spiritual gurus in the church. Don't make any teacher your standard for sanctity. If any teacher is seeking to lord it over you, it is because he thinks himself to be greater than Christ. And your purpose is to be like Jesus, not some famous (infamous) teacher. And this also means you do not set the standard for another as well. There is no salvation by comparison. That was the practice of the Pharisees: "I am more righteous than that person." No matter how much progress I make in Christlikeness, the standard remains Christ, not another Christian either from a one-up or a one-down position.

Listen to the words of our Lord in Matthew's Gospel:

23 Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, ² saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³ Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, *that* observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. ⁴ For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay *them* on men's shoulders; but they *themselves* will not move them with one of their fingers. ⁵ But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. ⁶ They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷ greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' ⁸ But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. ⁹ Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. ¹⁰ And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. ¹¹ But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted (Matthew 23:1-12).

The Pharisees were specialists in salvation by comparison. They loved the praise of people more than the praise of God (John 12: 42-43). They loved titles. They loved honor. But our Lord's teaching is less about clerical titles, than it is lording it over another in the church. That's the big point here. It is a command to not make yourself another's sole source of spiritual life (father). It is about not elevating another's teachings to be on par with those of Jesus. Instead, teachers and spiritual fathers and mothers are to assume the place of servant, and to humble themselves within the community. And they are to teach what Jesus and the apostles taught, and not novel or trendy doctrines.

Another illustration from Paul.

4 Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ² Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful. ³ But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. ⁵ Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God (I Corinthians 4:1-5).

There were trained orators and credentialed men who came to Corinth and placed Paul's authority and ministry in question. But Paul responds by making the issue about faithfulness, not personal charisma or credentials. "It is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court." Isn't that great? What freedom Paul enjoyed in making the Lord his only judge.

And James tell us,

¹¹ Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another? (James 4:11-12).

Once again, the exhortation is to avoid making yourself a judge over another. It is about not thinking you know what is best for others, while evading your own work. It is about not majoring in another's speck instead of the log in your own eye, thus revealing your own blindness.

Let me put it plainly: attempting to judge and fix others while avoiding your own faults is symptomatic of spiritual blindness; there is nothing helpful and caring about such behavior. It is the way of the hypocrite (v. 42). And humility is the cure for hypocrisy.

The law says, "Love your neighbor," not judge and fix him. Jesus says humble yourself, and become a servant, not a spiritual guru. James, says, do not speak evil of one another. Who are you to do so?

In my counseling practice, I do not tell people what to do. Instead, I ask questions. I reflect back what I am hearing. The goal is to help people hear themselves, and the Holy Spirit, not me. I share my experience, strength, and hope, but from an "I" position, and not from a place of a lecturer. I am no one's judge. I am not a spiritual guru. I do not possess special revelation. I am a disciple of Christ, and my job is to point people to him. My only credential is a transformed life, not my academic degree. This the same for all of us as a fellowship of Christians. We have one Father, one Teacher, one Judge. And for anyone to usurp that place, is nothing less than evil fruit once again appearing among the people of God.

So, let's summarize.

As members of the household of God we are to reflect the love and community that exists between the members of the Trinity. If you claim to be a Christian, and your relationships are characterized by conflict, fear, and pride, you must pause and consider your state before it is too late. Children of God are to be merciful, just as their heavenly Father is merciful. And in this community, progress in Christlikeness is the only certain evidence of the presence of spiritual life, not empty professions of faith. What is more, God has ordained that this progress occur within the body of Christ—the church. Discipleship, Christlikeness, and involvement in a healthy, trinitarian community are not options for the Christian, though many behave as though they are.

The key point is to focus on becoming like Jesus in thought, word, and deed, and avoid playing the Holy Spirit in another's life by judging and condemning, and arrogant caretaking.

The community of Christ is to be defined by forgiveness and giving, not one-up or one-down positions among each other—which is symptomatic of spiritual blindness. The disciple is to assume a place of a servant within the community, and to do his or her own work, and not specialize in fixing others so as to avoid working on their own faults. I cannot say it too often: the disciple is to become like his or her Master. But before any of this can happen, there must be an inward change of heart, produced by the Spirit of God. And how that happens, we will examine next week. **AMEN.**

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