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I'M JUDGMENTAL,
YOU'RE JUDGMENTAL

I remember walking into a hospital a few years ago and seeing a young girl sitting on a curb in front of the emergency room. She could not possibly have been over ten years old. She was petting a cat who seemed to greatly enjoy her company. I walked by the young girl and said, "Is that your cat?"

"No," she replied.

"I wonder how old it is?" I said.

"I don't know," she replied.

I then added, "I wonder if it is a boy or girl cat?"

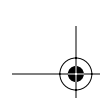
"I don't know," she said, as she continued to pet the cat.

Then I asked, "I wonder if it is from a neighborhood around here?"

Looking at me somewhat annoyed she said, "I don't know. Is that *important* to you?"

I walked into the hospital with a smile on my face and a lesson learned. I was trying to place this cat in some sort of preconceived category: gender, age, "socio-economic status" and so on. I was seeking a label or category in which to place this cat. For this little girl, however, there was no need for all this classification and pigeonholing of the cat. In fact, my questions were rather distracting. What was





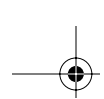
important to her was that this was a cat who wanted to be petted, and she was a little girl who wanted to pet the cat. All the other factors, all of my categorical schemes, were missing the whole point of the experience. By forcing the cat into one of my mental categories, I was neglecting her simple desire to “encounter” the cat.

I have thought of this little girl often and doubt that she will ever know how much she helped me that day. It was a reminder of the many ways that we as human beings dull our experience and reduce our adventures in life by trying to fit everything into neat little categories. How often we have our labels in hand, our categories in mind and our stereotypes with us when we approach new people or situations. It often makes me feel safe and secure when I can put people in a proper category. It reduces my anxiety. Labeling them reduces the intensity of the encounter and helps me quickly know what to do with the differences between us.

While I don't like admitting it, differences can often frighten me a bit. Differences between myself and another can easily provoke anxiety, which is quickly perceived as a threat. This threat can push me into a dualistic, black-or-white way of thinking in which one of us is “right” and the other is not. Sometimes I'm quite capable of judging other people in a very unfair manner, placing them into a category that makes life more manageable for me. “Of course Joe thinks that way. . . . He's a fundamentalist.” Or, “Of course Sally thinks that way. . . . She's a soft-headed liberal.” These easy categories keep me from genuinely hearing and conversing with others. If I let my anxiety get the best of me, I often fall prey to defensive, self-protective mental habits. It's much easier to live in my own mental backyard.

Yet another possibility is equally real. I may hear a differing opinion and immediately start judging *myself* rather than someone else: *Jim seems to know what he's talking about, so I must really be stupid.* I may





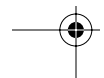
quickly withdraw my opinion and see the disagreement as just one more sign of how uninformed I am. If I keep bumping into highly opinionated people (and there are certainly a lot of them), my self-doubts and self-judgments may convince me that I have no right to voice an opinion at all: *I'll just listen to others; I'm not smart enough to offer anything to the conversation.*

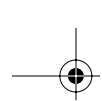
An unfortunate aspect of life is that often the people who most need to question themselves *don't*, the people who most need to doubt their opinions *don't*, and the people who most need to respect the boundaries of others will intrusively invade and force their opinions whether we want them or not.

I know a couple whom I'll call Ken and Brenda. These two have a very difficult time communicating. Often Brenda is very confused and concerned that there is a great deal about herself that remains hidden from her. She easily doubts herself and wonders where her blinders are. After a disagreement, she usually asks herself, *Was I being unfair? Are there things about Ken's perspective I'm not seeing? What if I don't see myself accurately at all?* Brenda is blessed (or cursed) with conscientiousness about her own behavior and recognition that she needs other people's perspectives to see the world more accurately.

Her husband, Ken, who is often quite opinionated, is not troubled by self-inventory and certainly does not engage in self-recrimination. He often says to people, "I know what I want, and I say what I mean." Ken takes a great deal of pride in the fact that he "calls it the way it is." He *knows* reality when he bumps into it, and he is not encumbered by what he calls "Brenda's insecure mind."

Brenda is at a tremendous disadvantage in this relationship. The irony of it is that her disadvantage results from strength—the ability to see several angles on things. Ken is clear, direct and non-self-doubting. Part of the reason that things seem so *obvious* to him is that



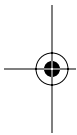


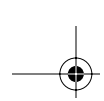
he has never bothered to take on other perspectives. He has the “inside truth” on things. So, when Brenda stops to hear his perspective and begins to doubt herself, he exploits that hesitation and sees it as “weakness.” Ken can be extremely manipulative and push Brenda into even more self-doubts. His pushiness grows out of his narrow focus. He is locked into his perspective and entrenched so deeply that he appears to Brenda as strong in his convictions, while she is uncertain. The truth is that while Brenda has a much fuller grasp of the world and is tentative because she is comprehensive, Ken’s tunnel vision gives him an emotional edge in the discussion. There are disadvantages to being open-minded!

JUST WHEN WE THINK WE’RE NOT JUDGMENTAL . . .

For quite some time, I have been interested in exploring the topic of judgmentalism . . . as long as it dealt with *other people’s* judgmental tendencies. I’ve been quick to spot in other people the rigid, authoritarian attitudes and statements that I often don’t like very much. I’ve engaged in a reactionary protest against their judgmental thinking. I have attacked all the stereotyping, labeling, pigeonholing and smug sense of certainty that went along with their rigid mentality. The black or white, simplistic reduction of complex issues seemed inhumane and unsatisfactory. How proud I was to point this out! What I did not realize, of course, is that I was stuck in my own judgmentalism. By constantly reacting to others’ judgmentalism, judgmentalism was actually controlling me. Yet I continued to throw stones at the judgmental stone-throwers.

What I also did not realize was that my harsh condemnation of judgmental people was every bit as judgmental as anything *they* were saying. I was becoming a narrow-minded defender of open-mindedness. I was intolerant of intolerance. I was a zealous missionary who



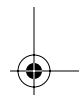
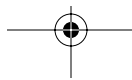
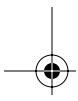
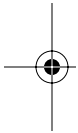


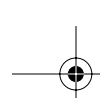
grandiosely thought it was my job to expand people's thinking. I was going to "control" those awful controlling tendencies in other people. While the content of what I was saying may have differed from the judgmental attitudes I had encountered, the process of my thinking was the same.

I can remember spending hours talking to friends about how people were trying to "control" me: *How dare they do that! Who gave them the right to get into my business! They were disrespecting my ability to regulate my own life as they invaded my world with their narrow-minded thinking.* Yet what gradually began to dawn on me was that I was spending way too much time reacting to these reactionary people. I resented the fact that they did not accept me as I was. I didn't like their attempts to force their own opinions on me. Yet what became painfully clear is that I was equally trying to control them. I was not accepting them. I was demanding that they see life from my "open-minded" position. I was judging them for their judgmentalism. They wanted me to be different from who I was; yet I, too, wanted them to be different from who they really were.

I began to realize that judgmentalism and authoritarian thinking can come in many clothes. Again, I had recognized it only in perspectives I didn't like. Now I had to put my own style or manner of thinking under a microscope. I began to realize that a judgmental mentality can pop up in practically every area of life. In fact, many of us who pride ourselves on having transcended the narrow confines of rigid thinking are actually stuck in thought patterns that are very inflexible. Again, it is easy to become self-righteous precisely when we are pointing out the self-righteousness of others. *I'm so thankful, I have unconsciously said to myself, that I don't engage in those "primitive" thought patterns.*

My point is simply this: When we think we have completely elim-

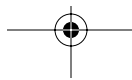


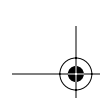


inated judgmentalism from our thinking, we probably need to take another look. In fact, when we think we have “arrived” at a non-biased, completely neutral and totally fair-minded perspective, we’re probably very deluded. Judgmental, authoritarian thinking is insidious, often sliding into our thoughts during times of anxiety and insecurity. It is not just “the other person’s problem.” In fact, I suspect it is *everyone’s* predicament, at least to some degree. We can certainly make steps toward recognizing and changing it within ourselves, yet we will most likely never be completely free of it.

This brings us to a very important realization: The world is not simply divided between judgmental and nonjudgmental people. Everyone is judgmental in some ways and nonjudgmental in others. This is not an either/or issue. James Davison Hunter has effectively demonstrated that judgmental extremism occurs in both the right and left camps.¹ Therefore, we need to approach this topic with humility, compassion and awareness that unwarranted pride may have entered our own way of thinking.

One of my students recently gave me an interesting example of “open-minded” hypocrisy and reminded me that judgmentalism can show up in many different contexts. She attends a very liberal church where there is enormous focus on appreciating diversity and hearing everyone’s perspective. The church clearly sees itself, she said, as different from more conservative churches because they welcome open dialogue. She told me that she would like to invite one of her friends to church, but her friend is pro-life. She went on to say that her Sunday morning class had been talking about social issues, and it became very clear to her that if anyone was not pro-choice, they would be “raked over the coals.” The issue was so clear-cut that there could not possibly be an argument coming from the other side. She went on to say, “I’m pro-choice myself, but my class cannot see any legitimacy in



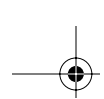


any pro-life perspective. I would literally be afraid of what might be said to my friend." She added, "My friend is a wonderful person with a deep commitment to pro-life, and she has really thought through these issues." Yet given the mindset of the group, she was afraid for her friend to attend.

Another example of judgmental thinking can be seen in the extremist reactions to Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*. Some judgmental people on the right wanted to denounce anyone who thought the film had antisemitic tones or was too violent. Yet, in this case, I saw far more judgmentalism on the left. Time and again, Gibson's motives for doing this film were reduced to his desire to get rich, his pathologically violent tendencies and his desire to depict a macho Jesus. Gibson's own testimony of being deeply moved to make the film was cynically downplayed. There was such a strong protest against the film in some circles that it bordered on prohibition. Many of these same "open-minded" filmgoers had been very critical of the conservative protest of Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ* several years earlier. Conservatives, they said, were condemning a film they had never seen. Yet were not "liberals" doing the same thing: making loud pronouncements on a film they didn't bother to watch? One of my friends, after scowling at me when she found out that I had attended the film, asked me, in a rather hostile manner, to explain myself.

My point here is not to stir up further controversy about this film but to point out some of the judgmentalism in those of us who think we have far surpassed any narrow-minded leanings. As I have pointed out, rigidity of thought can show up in *both* conservative and liberal climates. While the word *liberal* has sometimes meant generous or open to alternative opinions, a tense ideology can easily set in, a framework that becomes just as defensive as any form





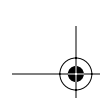
of conservative fundamentalism. Diversity is welcomed as long as the diversity is in agreement with the prevailing ideology. The moment that ideology is challenged, however, many “liberals” react with hostile defensiveness. They become dogmatically opposed to dogmatism, fanatical about fanaticism, intolerant of intolerance and rigid about rigidity.

Again, if we are to sincerely seek greater dialogue, we must look behind our easy self-congratulations that we are champions of open-mindedness, guardians of free inquiry and open to all perspectives. We, too, can villainize an opposing viewpoint, castigate the person behind the argument and demonstrate a severe insensitivity toward those with whom we disagree.

Indeed, judgmental people (which at one time or another includes each of us) are often very difficult. Yet if we extend to them the very judgments we so often receive from them, we perpetuate a cycle of intolerance that can lead to hatred. When we hear sarcastic, unfair comments, our knee-jerk tendency is to respond in like manner. Reactivity begets reactivity. It’s hard to keep our balance when we’ve been clobbered by judgmentalism.

It is doubtful that any of us really believe we are closed-minded. We want to see ourselves as being fair. It is important, therefore, to drop our guard long enough to examine carefully our own dispositions. Again, our anger and protests against other viewpoints can cloud our rationality as we pontificate from our emotional reactions. While we may strain to be cordial, our private conversations include all-or-nothing expletives to describe a “stupid” idea or “crazy” person. Even in colleges and universities, where flexible thinking and open-mindedness are presented as ideals, there is often a stubborn resistance and dogmatic campaign against other perspectives. Lip service may be given to a respect for diversity, but there is often tre-





mendous infighting and put-downs of people with alternative beliefs. At times, it is very difficult to find a balance in discussions where a variety of opinions are presented. Many years of schooling hardly guarantees that our opinion will be less judgmental, our reaction less extreme or our intolerance minimized. Many of us could name specific professors in universities who will not even speak to each other because of entrenched disagreements about theoretical points. They will not grant even the slightest legitimacy to others' viewpoints, yet they head toward their classes and talk about the importance of diversity in education.

I've also known counselors or psychotherapists who talk about tolerance for ambiguity with their clients, stress the significance of perspective-taking skills in counseling, then turn right around and argue passionately in a staff meeting that their style of therapy is the only legitimate one in mental health! What happened to the perspective-taking skills they valued a few minutes ago? What happened to their tolerance for ambiguity?

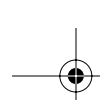
DEALING WITH JUDGMENTALISM

The first step in dealing effectively with judgmentalism is fully recognizing how slippery, conniving and insidious it can be. We may become *less* judgmental, but it is doubtful that we'll ever be completely *nonjudgmental*. Therefore, humility is needed.

My suggestion, as we explore the topic of judgmentalism, is to begin with the assumption that we *are* judgmental. Let's move away from an "us" and "them" mentality that focuses on the judgmentalism out there. Nonjudgmentalism is much like humility—once you assume you have it, this is a pretty sure indicator that you don't.

Judgmentalism involves two forms of superiority. First is moral superiority. This is one of the primary reasons that Jesus tells us in Mat-



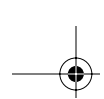


thew 7:1 to “judge not.” As we judge another person, we are acting as a condescending spectator, not as a player. We are pushing aside our own shortcomings, faults, limits and finitude while we assess another. But once we get off the bleachers and into the game, we may find that life is much more complex than our spectator position had realized. Second, judgmentalism also involves a deep sense of intellectual superiority insofar as we believe we are capable of evaluating the entire context of another’s life, with all its variables. It is an arrogant illusion that we can size up someone’s entire life; we simply don’t know the whole story. We don’t know how others have been hurt, the struggles of their lives or the overall context out of which they have lived. Some may think this sounds dangerously close to excusing another’s behavior, but this is not at all what I am suggesting. I am simply saying that we, coming out of our own set of assumptions, viewpoints, limitations and cognitive finitude, cannot possibly deliver a “final verdict” about another’s entire life. We may have very definite judgments about specific *acts* this person has committed, but we don’t have the intellectual resources to determine the nature of his or her entire existence.

Perhaps one of the reasons Jesus warned so vigorously against judgmentalism is that it makes a god or idol of our own viewpoint. Judgmentalism always means forgetting our limitations and finitude; we think we’ve found a “place” from which to give a final estimate of another.

Perhaps you’ve had an experience similar to my own. On occasion, I’ve had an opportunity to really get to know someone whose life has involved some destructive behavior. A person I’ll call Jill very deeply confided in me about the course her life had taken. She told me many things about her childhood, most of which were very difficult for her to say. Jill had been sexually abused by her uncle and vir-





tually ignored by her parents. She spent most of the time with her rather detached grandparents. She developed negative views of herself, which she tried to hide behind a tough exterior. She developed a sense of belonging with a group of teenagers who were doing some destructive things. She eventually got in trouble with the law.

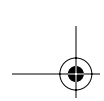
I'm not excusing Jill's behavior, but a person deeply hungry for love, acceptance and affirmation lived beneath Jill's skin. I *knew* this about her. She was capable of enormous kindness and fondness for others, especially unfortunate children, which is why it was difficult to be in a conversation with "upright" people when Jill's name was brought up. "That girl is a tramp," said one person. "She'll never amount to anything." The group then bemoaned a world full of Jills and condescendingly insinuated that they were very happy that their lives had never sunk to that level.

So there I was, boiling inside because I knew a different Jill. I did not say anything because Jill had confided in me personally. So I listened to a group of completely uninformed people who knew nothing about Jill's personal life tell me all about her. The whole time I thought, *I'd like to see how you would handle what she has been through.* All I said was, "Well, folks, we don't know the whole story."

Judgmentalism makes us more and more alienated from our own dark side. When we are shocked and preoccupied with the "horrible" actions of others, our attention is removed from our own destructive behavior. Focused on the deplorable behavior of outsiders, we are freed from looking at ourselves. In fact, we can tell ourselves that their behavior is unthinkable or unimaginable. We could never do something like that!

Harsh condemnations of others indicate a lack of grace and tender acceptance in our own lives. With so many things being unacceptable, we are afraid to shine the flashlight into our own closets. Con-



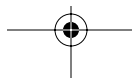


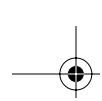
sequently, we remain ignorant of our own hidden aspirations, unconscious motivations and capability for destructive behavior. We are simply afraid to explore ourselves. Why? Because we don't want those judgmental guns pointed at us. We don't have enough grace and acceptance to freely make that inward journey. The fear of condemnation is much greater than the assurance of acceptance.

In many ways, John 8:1-11 conveys all the ingredients we need for a comprehensive understanding of judgmentalism. A woman caught in the act of adultery was thrown down before Jesus as onlookers prepared to stone her to death. One may immediately wonder where the male in this story was and why he wasn't held to the same level of accountability as the woman. Nevertheless, the accusers maintained that according to the law of Moses, the woman should be stoned to death. Jesus, writing in the sand, suggested that whoever among them was without sin could cast the first stone. After each of them dropped their rocks and walked away, Jesus told the woman that he did not condemn her either. He told her to go and sin no more.

This scene tells us a great deal about the nature and dynamics of judgmentalism. First, the accusers were able to use the woman's sin as a method of self-avoidance. In other words, as long as they could focus on the external behavior of someone else, they did not have to look at their own sin. She served as an important distraction. Further, there was a complete identification of this woman's particular behavior with her entire personhood. She was "nothing but" an adulterer. Her humanity was not seen. Fixation on a single act blinded the accusers to the greater context of her life. No one asked about her life circumstances or her own particular struggles. No one dared empathize with this woman's plight.

While this may not have excused her behavior, it would have helped the onlookers see the greater context of her life and become





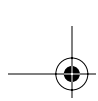
more understanding. As a public accusation, this event was devastatingly shameful to the woman. Jesus, perhaps by drawing in the sand and not making eye contact with the woman, refused to bring her further shame. Jesus also encouraged the accusers to turn their attention back toward their own lives. He would not allow them to scapegoat this woman. And when the accusers had left, Jesus approached the woman with kindness, which did not overlook an important ethical principle. The woman was not told that her behavior was exonerated, overlooked or no big deal; instead, she was encouraged to change her life. This was not cheap grace, an acceptance that did not invite repentance. Jesus honored the woman and essentially said that she had too much value and dignity to live as she had been living.

Judgmentalism, on the other hand, enhances self-righteousness through putting others down. One of the biggest psychological payoffs of judgmentalism is feeling proud that we are not like “those other people.” We are one-up on them. Temporarily forgetting our own humanity, we are entitled to evaluate another human being. In fact, it’s very easy to fall in love with the job of measuring and ranking others.

We may not consciously be aware that tearing down others can inflate ourselves. Yet the underlying message is something like, *I wouldn't think of doing such a thing*, or *I could never do that* or *I am shocked and aghast at such behavior*. We are usually noting how utterly different we are from these people or how we would simply never sink to their level. Criticizing others is not just an offensive move against them; it is also a defensive move to protect our own “purity.”

When we are judgmental, therefore, we *need* other people’s faults in order to dodge our own. Stated simply, judgmental thinking is addicted to other people’s faults or destructive behavior. Judgmentalism finds its identity in what it *is not*. It defines itself by what it is reacting





against. If there were no one around to condemn, judgmentalism wouldn't know what to do with itself.

The judgments we hold about specific issues need to come from a larger context of care and love. While we cannot possibly *feel* the same toward all people, we are asked to *act* lovingly regardless of the level of affection we may or may not have toward them. Acting with love and being judgmental are mutually opposed to each other. Seeing the dignity beneath obnoxious behavior, recognizing the irreducible value of all people and caring for the person beneath the unfair ideas is an enormous challenge. Our only hope, in my estimation, is to regularly remind ourselves of the grace that has been given to us and to allow that grace to extend outward. Roberta Bondi sums this up very well:



Loving can be difficult business. It is impossible to grit the teeth and love, no matter how much we may want to. That is because human effort is only one of the two basic elements necessary for the fulfillment of all Christian goals and desires, but particularly for love. The other is God's grace. Without grace, nothing is possible.²

