**Luke 6:36-42**

**Making right judgments**

“Do not judge others, and God will not judge you.”

Is that even possible? What on earth does Jesus mean by saying this? And when we think about that statement in the context of the rest of the Bible, we see that there’s an awful lot of judgement going on! God is constantly judging people and communities. We read about the Final Judgement. There’s even a book in the Old Testament called ‘The Book of Judges’!

So what does it mean when Jesus says: “Do not judge others, and God will not judge you”? Because clearly we all make judgements as part of human living and there are plenty of examples of judging in Scripture. Surely it is good to judge.

Well, let’s think about the context.

Just before Jesus makes this statement, he says something else: “Be merciful just as your Father is merciful.”

The first principle of judging is mercy. Any activity of judging that we make must be underpinned by mercy.

Mercy is to not give people the punishment they deserve. And it is a beautiful matter of fact that God does make judgments about our behaviour and the decisions we make but, in his judgement, he decides to show mercy towards us and not give us what we deserve.

When we think about our lives, the mistakes we have made, the mistakes we continue to make, God is correct in his judgement that we stand Guilty before him. And yet, he responds with mercy and forgives us.

But here’s the thing with God: there can be no mercy without judgement. Mercy can only be shown if a judgement has been made that we are Guilty.

There can be judgement without mercy but there can be no mercy without judgement.

And the truth is that we too inevitably judge the behaviour of others towards us: when we are hurt by what they say, when we are hurt by how they have behaved towards us. It is human – it is divine – to judge, because that is part of the process of understanding what has happened.

The question is: what are we going to do with that judgement?

Are we going to condemn or are we going to be merciful?

Showing mercy towards others has to start with a deep awareness that God has been merciful towards us. If I have a deep experience of God’s mercy, if I know deeply what it is to be forgiven, even when I have made bad choices, then I will be more willing to show that same mercy to others.

Who am I to condemn others when God has not condemned me?

And that’s what Jesus says here in verse 37: “Do not judge others, and God will not judge you. Do not condemn others, and God will not condemn you; forgive others, and God will forgive you.”

Not condemning others, not sitting in judgement over others, having the ability to forgive those who have hurt us, has to begin from our own experience of God’s grace and mercy towards us.

So perhaps when Jesus says, “Do not judge others, and God will not judge you”, what he is really saying is this: it is not that we are not to judge at all: that is impossible. But that we are not to judge incorrectly.

We are to judge mercifully.

We are to judge and forgive.

Without judgement, there can be no mercy.

So how do we judge correctly? I think there’s two principles to abide by…

**1. Don’t be hypocritical**

It is always dangerous to judge someone’s behaviour, for a whole host of reasons, and not least because we don’t know their what their life story is.

There are always circumstances that lead to people making the decisions they do, for good and for bad. We don’t know their circumstances or what has led up to their behaviours. So we have no right to stand in pious judgement over anyone

Who knows how we would respond if their life story was ours? As the saying goes: “There but for the grace of God go I.”

We are all just frail and weak human beings, muddling through life as best we can.

**2. Remember that only God knows the heart of others**

It is an increasingly unpopular thing to do these days, especially on social media platforms, but I think it really is important to give other people the benefit of the doubt.

We don’t know what is going on in people’s hearts. We don’t know their motivations. We don’t know their fears and anxieties.

And it is always better to begin by giving people the benefit of the doubt rather than rushing into critical judgement.

So, I don’t think Jesus is condemning judgement in this passage. Instead, I think he is encouraging us to judge correctly.

Jesus judged others.

Moses, the Old Testament Judges and all the prophets judged people.

God the Father will hold a Final Judgement.

We all make judgements as part of everyday living. Judging is an essential part to our daily living: it’s how we stay safe, it’s how we make good and rational choices, it’s how we form positive relationships. Judging, in and of itself, is not wrong. The question is, what do we do with the judgements we have made.

If our response is not based in mercy, then we fail to mirror the love of God.

If we are hypocritical, thinking that we are better than others, then we fail to mirror the love of God.

If we don’t give people the benefit of the doubt, then we fail to mirror the love of God.

Judging is part of life. But let’s do so without condemnation. Let’s do so without a sense of superiority. Let’s do so with hearts full of forgiveness and mercy.

And by so doing, we will reflect the loving heart of God in our relationships with others.

**Some questions to think about…**

1. This reflection assumes that the notion of ‘judgment’ is neutral. It is what we do with our judgments that is important. Do you agree with that?
2. What do you believe about the Final Judgment of God? In what sense is that a reality for you?
3. When we think about the Old Testament prophets, they were constantly judging political authorities for neglecting the poor and the marginalized. Is this a role for the church today?
4. How should St. Andrew’s engage in the role of holding local authorities to account? Do you see yourself as having a part to play in this?
5. Have you ever experienced feeling ‘judged’ by Christians for your lifestyle? Would you like to share anything about that?
6. Have you ever been part of a church that judged others unfairly for their lifestyle choices? How did you feel about that?
7. Is St. Andrew’s a church that judges or accepts people for who they are? Do you have examples of that? How can we improve?
8. How have you experienced God’s mercy in your own life?
9. Do you think God’s mercy truly extends to everyone or are there limits to that?
10. What do you think we, as a church family, need to learn from this passage at the current time?
11. What will you personally take from this passage at the current time?