



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau
January 22, 2017
The Perils of Playing God—Real Faith for Real People Series
The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw

Before we dig into what this text is challenging us to be and to do, I want to put this exhortation in the larger context of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I want to do this because when we understand what has been graciously done for us, we will be less inclined to judge others as James warns us not to do. And we will begin to interact with other in ways that will actually build them up rather than tear them down.

It happened in Amiens, which is today in Northern France, during the extremely harsh winter of 335 AD. That's a long time ago. For centuries, the gospel of Jesus Christ has been having this kind of impact on people. When we get to know Jesus, when we begin to understand His heart and character, when we truly recognize what He has done and is doing for us, we can begin to change. And when we live differently, people in our world are touched by the love of Christ.

There was a poor man, half-naked, who asked for help from a man passing by on a horse. Person after person had walked by, or rode by, that man freezing in the cold. No one paid any attention to him. The man on the horse was Martin of Tours. He was a Roman military officer, who was also a follower of Jesus. Underneath his impressive uniform, Martin had no money to give the shivering man.

So Martin was presented with a dilemma. What would he do? Would he pass by like everyone else? Would he come to the same conclusion that others had, that there was nothing he could do? If we haven't cocooned ourselves from the people in our lives, if we haven't turned away from the needs of the people of the world, we will recognize this dilemma.

The simple act that Martin did for that man in the snow has been depicted in paintings and sculptures over the centuries. The simple act he did proclaimed the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Martin simply took out his sword and cut his coat in two and gave one half to the man begging for help and put what was left of his coat around himself. Martin's biographer says that bystanders laughed at Martin as he rode into town in his now tattered uniform. No accusations were hurled at the freezing man. No questions about how he got himself in the mess he was in. Just an act of generosity.

That night while Martin slept, he had a dream and in that dream he saw a vision of heaven. Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier's coat. And an angel asked Jesus, "Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak?" And Jesus said to the angel, "My servant Martin gave it to me."

In Basel, Switzerland, in St. Martin's Church, on the front wall is a sculpture that captures this simple act of kindness from one human being to another, this simple expression of the gospel of Jesus from one person who had something to offer a person on the margins, shivering in the cold.

I love to watch TV shows about the U.S. Coast Guard. People get themselves in all sorts of predicaments. They slip off the side of mountain while hiking. The engine on a fisherman's boat fails 50 miles out to sea in the middle of a storm.

When things like that happen, the Coast Guard jumps in a helicopter and races to the rescue. They fish the person off the cliff or lift them off their floundering ship and fly them to safety. No fingerprinting. No accusing questions about what they heck they were thinking hiking in that spot or sailing in this weather. There's no judgment. No condemnation. They just jump into action and try to save a person from the predicament they're in.

Before we look at what James has to say, I want to look first at a couple of significant things that Jesus Himself has to say.

First, Matthew chapter 25, verse 31.

Matthew 25:31 - *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.*

During the day shepherds often had their sheep and their goats grazing together as one flock. But at the end of the day, just before nightfall they separated the sheep and the goats into their own enclosures.

34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’

37 Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’

40 And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

It’s a very important passage. That is what the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God looks like. If you’re a follower of Jesus Christ, as I am, our primary citizenship is in

the Kingdom of God. We are to show the world what it looks like to be under the authority of Jesus Christ, our King. He is the one to whom we have primary allegiance if we are His disciples.

So, it’s really important that we understand what Jesus is saying. It’s really important that we know how we are to act if we belong to Christ. I love the lack of self-awareness on the part of those who will inherit the Kingdom of God in this passage. They have simply seen people who are hurting and done what they can do to help.

The Kingdom of God that Jesus talked about and demonstrated with his life is a Kingdom in which the poor, the sick, the grieving, women and children, slaves and widows, orphans and aliens—those who are often pushed to the margins—are lifted up into God’s embrace. The Kingdom Jesus talked about is a Kingdom where justice is more than something people hoped for but a reality that they began to experience.

The Kingdom Jesus talked about is one where people who are being transformed by God’s love and grace, live lives of growing mercy and compassion. The Kingdom Jesus talked about is not one that was far away, to be experienced only in the life to come. No, the Kingdom Jesus talked about is to be known and experienced here and now in this world. The Kingdom of heaven that Jesus talked about is to touch the earth.

In Mark 1:14-15 Jesus gives his shortest sermon. And that two verse talk sums up his entire mission in the world. It’s just one sentence long.

Mark 1:14 - *Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”*

The Kingdom of God is at hand. The future is breaking into the present. And everything Jesus did demonstrated that fact. In the gospels we see a man with leprosy healed. A blind man receives his sight. A person crippled for 38 years stands on his feet. That’s the Kingdom of God coming into our world.

Jesus brings together people who would never have trusted one another. People who hated each other became friends. He calls Simon the Zealot, a man who was an armed revolutionary, to join His team of disciples. And to that same team He calls Matthew the tax collector, a man who was a collaborator with the foreign invaders. And Simon and Matthew become brothers. That is the Kingdom of God breaking into our lost world.

Women are invited into this community of disciples. A woman from Samaria, a woman who had been married five times, became the first person after Jesus to announce the good news of the Kingdom to her community and lots of people come to believe that Jesus is who He said He was...the Savior of the world. That is the Kingdom of God turning the world right side up.

Jesus invites Himself to the home of Zaccheus, a dishonest IRS agent on the take, and this man renounces his corrupt ways, and pays back everyone four times what he took from them. And Jesus says, “Salvation has come to this home today.”

That is the Kingdom of God breaking into our world.

Jesus stands at the door of the tomb of his good friend Lazarus and says, "Lazarus, Come out!" And Lazarus comes out, wearing his grave clothes. That is the Kingdom of God come near.

Jesus enters the Temple courts, makes a whip and cracks it. "My father's house is to be a place of prayer and you have made it a den of thieves." And he drives out the moneychangers. That is God's new world order challenging the illegitimate rule of corruption and power in our world.

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus stooped down after supper and washed His disciples feet. That is the Kingdom of God coming near.

And Jesus hangs on a Roman cross and dies that humanity might live. And from that cross He says in earshot of His tormentors, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." That is the Kingdom of God breaking into our world.

That's what the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about: touching the lives of hurting, broken, sinful people like you and me who are feeling crushed by their mistakes, their illnesses, their broken relationships.

The statements Jesus makes about who He was and why He came—all of it—is completely consistent with what He teaches His disciples in Matthew 25 about who they were to become. This is Jesus' mission in the world and it is to be the mission of all who follow Him. This is how we are to see and interact with the people in our lives. Instead of passing judgment on one another, we are to do what our

God does with us. We are to come alongside those whose lives have collapsed in on them and help them to their feet. And because that is so, that is why James says what he says in chapter 4 verses 11 and 12. This is advice for women and men who are citizens of the Kingdom of God.

James 4:11 - *Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against 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 and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?*

James has been working really hard on us in the first three chapters of his book. His goal has been to get us to understand that people with genuine faith in Christ are people who are growing in humility. Pastor Dan talked about that last week. Arrogance is incompatible with the gospel. I think arrogance is often a cover for great insecurity and it always reflects that one has not really come to know Jesus. James illustrates humility, a core virtue of the Christian faith, with powerful words and potent images.

We've already seen how he contrasted those who are wise in their own eyes with those who have humble wisdom from God (3:13-18). And he explored the cause of quarrels and conflicts—envious ambitions, cured only by submitting to God in true humility (4: 1-10). Now James goes a step further. In this text he deals with our tendency to take the place of God in other peoples' lives. His goal is to get us to stop judging or criticizing others. He flat out challenges us to not do that. When we do take on the role of judge,

we're playing God. In fact, I think implicit in his exhortation to stop judging others is to actually become people who build others up rather than tear them down. But so often, that is not what we do, especially when we've been hurt by someone else.

Chuck Swindoll writes, "Let me show you how this game (of judging) works. You speak against the other person in (earshot of others), hoping to lower their estimate of the person—and in the process you hope to make yourself look all the better. Of course, you have to cover up your malicious intent with creative sentimentality. So, you begin your statements with, "Now, stop me if I'm wrong, but..." or, "Now, I don't mean to be critical, but ..." or, "Perhaps I shouldn't say this about him or her, but..." or even, "I really like so-and-so as a person, but..." And we then launch into our judgment of someone else.

The Bible repeatedly condemns judgmental attitudes and actions. Jesus said, "*Do not judge so that you will not be judged*" (Matt. 7: 1). "*How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye?"* (Matt. 7: 4). And Paul wrote, "*You have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself.*" (Romans 2:1)

Now this doesn't rule out wise discernment. What James and the other New Testament writers are focusing on is judgment that results in condemnation and rejection. If we judge others like that we are breaking the royal law, which tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves. The real danger of judging others is that it comes perilously close to playing God.

So, James reminds us that there is only One Lawgiver and Judge and we are not that person. When we pass judgment on others it is wrong. We are not God!

Let's explore our propensity to judge others a little further. We often make critical judgments of people with incomplete information. Anyone guilty of that? Rather than seeking to understand the other person's experience, the challenges they're facing and have faced, we make assumptions.

Rather than working to understand what actually happened in a situation where we feel offended, we make judgments. We put ourselves in a superior position at the expense of someone else. Instead of asking questions to promote understanding, we critique; we supply meaning to the other person's actions. And the meaning we supply is often incorrect.

Instead of doing the compassionate work of listening, we speak and instead of speaking words that build others up; we tear them down in order to build ourselves up. We do that because we have forgotten something extremely important. God, who knows us completely, sent His Son, not to condemn but to restore.

Jesus came not to judge but to save. He had every right to condemn us but, in His grace, He chose to enter our broken, messed up lives. He came alongside us and told us that He wanted to be in a relationship with us. He spoke words of encouragement and affirmation when we had done nothing to deserve those words of blessing.

In fact, we've done lots of things that have earned His judgment. But instead of judgment,

He offers us grace and forgiveness. Instead of crushing us, He picks us up and encourages us.

The antidote to being the kind of judgmental people James talks about in this passage is this. We need to let God's grace permeate our lives more deeply. We need to remember all that we have been forgiven so that we might be people who extend that same grace to others.

Can we become people who simply run to the side of people in need and offer them what they need? No fingerprinting. No accusing questions about how they got themselves into the mess they're in. No judgment. No condemnation. And when we do that, the Kingdom of God will touch the earth.

I've titled this talk, "The Perils of Playing God." So, I'd actually like to encourage all of us to play God this week. But let's receive His grace and compassion and extend that grace and compassion and mercy to others. Let's work at playing the God we meet in Jesus Christ.

+ + + + + + + + + +

Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com