

Knowing Who to Follow

Luke 6:39–42

We have all heard stories about college professors who are no longer held accountable because they have earned some degree of tenure. Still, on occasion, justice prevails and students are at least invited to give their evaluations of a teacher. Someone has compiled the following evaluations:

- Evil computer science teaching robot who crushes humans for pleasure.
- Miserable professor - I wish I could sum him up without foul language.
- BORING! But I learned there are 137 tiles on the ceiling.
- Not only is the book a better teacher, it also has a better personality.
- Teaches well, invites questions and then insults you for 20 minutes.
- Bring a pillow.
- Your pillow will need a pillow.
- If I was tested on her grandkids, I would have gotten an A.

In the church, not many believers should presume that they are teachers: This is not because an evaluation by students carries any particular weight, but rather, because God’s evaluation does.

¹Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. – James 3:1

Nevertheless, in spite of this warning, there never seems to be a shortage of people who are willing to tell us what they think or to tell us how we should think. And, there certainly never seems to be a shortage of folks to make commentary on the rightness and wrongness of our choices. On the one hand, we do not want to close our ears to the direction that others can give us, but neither do we want to become crippled by their merciless nitpicking. In our Christian faith as in most walks of life, it is helpful to have some sense of who is and who is not worth listening to.

Jesus was addressing a mixed crowd. His twelve closest disciples were there. Other peripheral disciples were present. People had flocked to Galilee from Jerusalem and Judea as well as from the coastal area of Tyre and Sidon. Some came to hear what He had to say. Some came to be healed of their diseases or delivered from demons. But, enemies of Jesus were also present that day. He had directly addressed a class of people that included the oppressive rich, the frivolously affluent and those well-thought-of by others. These targeted enemies may have been Pharisees.

Even if Jesus was not addressing actual Pharisees, He was certainly speaking to people whose world-views were shaped by the Pharisees, the dominant source of religious thought in that day. These people believed that they abided in the center of God’s favor, not because they had ever gone to any great pains to know God’s mind, but simply because their lives were comfortable. They took that to mean that God preferred them to those who were not so well off. So, were Jesus’ words here intended to rebuke the spiritually proud of His day or to warn His disciples to avoid ever becoming like them? A choice is not necessary. Both objectives were relevant.

I. The Danger of a Sightless Guide (39)

³⁹He also told them this parable: “Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?”

A. People Tend to Follow where They Are Led

In Jesus' mind, it was perfectly fair to depict the Pharisees and their ilk as blind guides who were leading God's people into a pit. And, what was this pit? It was the barren deadness of a stale, works-oriented form of religion that knew nothing of the spirit and truth of a covenant God Who desires to fill the lives of His people. All things were measured by naked externals. If a man was rich, God must like Him. If an enterprise succeeded, it must be God's blessing. If a man was ill, then he or his parents must have sinned and God was getting even. The people did not know the beauty or the joy of the mind of God because the nation's guides did not know the mind of God.

B. Perils Still Abound

If people today are not conscientious about looking past the charisma of leaders so as to assess their substance, perilous pits still await them. The most common pit is that same degree of distance from the mind of God, a distance that keeps their lives from bearing spiritual fruit.

But, these days, blind guides can also lead God's people into pits of superstition and speculation. There are many fanciful approaches out there to prayer, worship, prosperity, spiritual warfare, the end-time, *etc.* that do as much to distract believers from a healthy and well-balanced pursuit of discipleship as they do to facilitate it. When a believer is off trying to master the spectacular, he often develops disenchantment for the more mundane demands of discipleship such as self-denial, service, sacrifice, and stewardship. While he is trying to figure out what the end of time will look like or how to unlock the doors of financial prosperity, how much attention will he be giving to the work of forgiving others, or building-up his church or ministering to the broken?

Blind guides can lead us in paths of extremism. That which is true enough can be emphasized by some one-topic guide to the point that other truths are not given their rightful due. Theological legalism is a pit that celebrates the virtue of obedience to God at the expense of grace. Theological liberalism is a pit that celebrates the loving fatherhood of God at the expense of His revealed holiness and His integrity in condemning sin. There is a seed of truth in both extremes, but countless other essential truths are sacrificed to the point of presenting a distorted view of God.

Ultimately, blind teaching can lead others into the pit of spiritual death. We may not like hearing that, but whenever anything but "Christ and him crucified" becomes the centerpiece for some man's or some church's teaching ministry, a pit of some nature is just around the corner.

II. The Deficiency of a Smart Teacher (40)

... ⁴⁰A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher.

A. People Tend to Become what Is Modeled for Them

"Student" is the same word elsewhere translated "disciple." Jesus had in mind the typical rabbi-disciple relationship that was common in His world. A rabbi would choose a number of promising young learners who would leave their own homes and move in with him. The disciple served the master in the most servile of ways, washing his feet, bringing him his meals, *etc.* To the disciple, the rabbi was an absolute authority figure. A disciple was expected to learn everything that his rabbi knew and also to imitate his character. The rabbi wanted to pour himself into these receptive vessels so that his wisdom might be transmitted through them to the ages.

Jesus had twelve such disciples. Of course, the unique teaching and character of Jesus demanded that He be as much of a servant to them as they were to Him. Also, Jesus had no home. The group was largely dependent on benefactors and hosts. And, the Twelve were not promising young students. Most of them were non-academic, grown men from various walks of life. But, they were still the men who were called not simply to know what Jesus knew, but to be like Him and to pass His teachings along. And, when we are called to be disciples today, nothing less is expected of us.

In every age, the church has been blessed with individuals gifted to equip us as disciples. But, there remains enough ornery pride in us to tend to latch onto certain teachers, preferring them over others as if it were some sort of a competition. We like this guy's style or his take on a certain topic. That's fine up to the point that we begin to close our ears to what others have to offer. This happened in ancient Corinth. Paul, Peter and Apollos each brought a unique flavor to the teaching of Christ, but, rather, than celebrate the differences, Corinth divided up into camps that boasted over following one or another of these men. Paul pleaded with them to look beyond those human teachers to Christ. He asked, "Is Christ divided?" (1 Corinthians 1:13).

Jesus' closest men were competitive. They often argued among themselves as to which of them would be the greatest in the kingdom. This proverb about the limitations of teachers might one day remind them that they were not to make disciples for themselves, for no one needed to be conformed to their images. They would need to keep their egos in check as they rose to positions of prominence in the early church and as young believers adoringly whispered their names. They were to represent Jesus. The only disciples they were to recruit were disciples of Jesus. The only words that needed to be revered were Jesus' words. The only character that needed to be reproduced in others was His.

B. "Call No Man Your Teacher ..."

It is a long process becoming like Jesus. Along the way, you will meet many people who are gifted to assist you to that end. Embrace them all. Do not be overly-captivated by any of them. A disciple will become fully like his master. You have only one Master. Jesus taught His disciples:

⁸"But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. ⁹And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. ¹⁰Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ. - Matthew 23:8-10

Now, functionally, the church has many characters that we might call teachers and mentors. History even alludes to those great men who guided the church during her formative years as "church fathers." Jesus is simply warning us to never idolize any teacher. There can only be one disciple-rabbi relationship in any of our lives and that is with Jesus. Many people will pass across the stages of our lives that can help us pursue Christ, but any teacher who seems unable to point beyond himself to the grace and supremacy and authority of Jesus is to be avoided.

Paul understood this, which is why he wrote to the Corinthians: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). I don't think I am going beyond his meaning when I paraphrase him: "Follow me as I follow Christ, but don't follow me a single step beyond that."

III. The Denseness of a Smug Judge (41, 42)

⁴¹Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴²How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

A. This Is Judgment under the Guise of Love

Pharisees are not always "in-your-face" finger-wagging judges. In fact, the judges that have caused me the most distress and self-doubt have been those who insisted that they were either speaking in love or in behalf of some higher good right before they shredded me to pieces. Jesus depicts such a judge as addressing his target, "Brother," before he gets to his real point. That's smug. Jesus calls it hypocrisy. Some of the most critical judges I have ever encountered cloaked themselves in a syrupy sweetness that apparently was calculated to lend credence to their judgments. But, on the occasions when such judgments were still dismissed, it was amazing to discover the violent, hysterical meanness that hovered just beneath that facade of spirituality and love and gentleness.

Love does not set itself up as a policeman over the minor flaws in others. Jesus calls the offense in question "a speck of sawdust." Love covers over a multitude of specks. We all struggle with sin. Love knows when and when not to intervene because it acknowledges a natural process of spiritual maturation that will tend to specks. And, when intervention is appropriate, love has a sense of how to intervene.

Love empathizes. Love takes into account the burdens and pressures that a person is enduring. The knee-jerk judge never takes the time required to process such factors before charging in.

Comedian Steve Martin said, "Before you criticize a man, walk a mile in his shoes. That way, when you do criticize him, you'll be a mile away and you'll have his shoes." On second thought, F.B. Meyers advice might be more useful. He argues that we should be slow to judge because ...

"... first, we do not know how hard he or she tried not to sin. And second, we do not know the power of the forces that assailed him or her. We also do not know what we would have done in the same circumstances."

Finally, love produces relationships, not wreckage. In fact, it is difficult for us to correct one another at all if there is not some sort of established bond of love that is already being forged. What good is ever accomplished when a person swoops in to correct you and swoops away just as quickly? Does the fact that he called you "brother" make you feel better? Are you supposed to believe he loves you just because he said so first? Perhaps, if you already had a sense that he loved you before he hammered you, the whole process might seem more palatable. Friends wound us for our good, but typically, we know that they are our friends before they wound us.

B. Cleaning up Your Own Act Can Keep You Busy Enough

It is likely that we each have struggles with bigger things in our own lives than we are able to identify at a glance in the lives of others. Jesus calls us to give attention to those matters first. Take the plank out of your own eye.

At the Redstone Arsenal in Alabama, an inspection was being conducted. The colonel came to the man standing next to the soldier who recalled the incident. The officer stopped, looked the man up and down, then snapped, "Button that pocket, trooper!"

The soldier, more than a little rattled stammered, "Right now, sir?"

"Of course right now!" was the reply.

Whereupon the soldier carefully reached out and buttoned the flap on the colonel's shirt pocket. We must tend to the planks in our eyes before we offer to straighten out anyone else.

And yet, we see it all the time. The most severe critics of others are often blind to their own selfishness, resentment, harshness, materialism or idolatry. Theirs is not "a speck of sawdust" but "a plank" and they do not even acknowledge it. They are not entitled to offer a judgment on the minor defects in the lives of others because they have not invested themselves in a relationship with that person and, especially, because they have so much of their own baggage with which to contend. The idea that their judgment of another is even credible, much less useful, is laughable.

C. Even the Judge of the World Is Reluctant to Judge

On the night before He died, one of the most pressing matters on Jesus' heart was that His disciples would not abandon His words. But, He also pointed out that even if a man does fail to keep His words, He was not going to prejudge that person at that point. In fact, many disciples through the ages would struggle to keep His words, and we still struggle to keep them today. But, a final judgment on these matters can wait until the end of the age, because there is always room for repentance to do its work and for grace to restore a stumbling soul to faithfulness.

⁴⁷"As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it. ⁴⁸There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day. – John 12:47

Judgment on unbelief is inevitable. The Gospel and whether or not a man embraces it will become the basis for condemnation one day. However, Jesus' mission when He came to us was simply to sow that Word and to call men to believe it so that they might receive life from God.

In regard to your insights into what is going on in the life of another, there is always more that you do not know about your brother's situation than you do know. Now, if Jesus Himself is willing to reserve judgment until the end of the age when everything shakes out and all has been settled, then, surely you can resist the tendency to voice your knee-jerk assessments of others.

In the meantime, know your own heart. Don't be too proud to process criticisms from any source, but don't allow yourself to be crippled by them either. Seek God's light on the condition of your own heart and yield to His hand of correction. And, work on forging loving relationships with others, so that when the time comes for interventions, a useful foundation will have been laid.

The speck in your brother's eye may continue to cause him problems. There may come a time when he needs your help. Just make sure before that happens that he already knows that you love him and that he already knows that you see yourself as a sinner who is also daily in need of the grace of God. He'll appreciate your perspective. He may even welcome your help.