

The Shack - Are You Sure You Want to be the Judge?

1. WELCOME (30 minutes)

- Start on time; it'll be easier to end on time (something professionals and moms with kids in school will appreciate about your leadership).
- You go first. Answer the question: Tell us of a time when your initial judgment of a person or a situation turned out to be entirely wrong. Leaders, take some time before group and think of a time in which you judged someone unfairly. Don't get religious! Remember: your honesty sets the tone for your group. Ask group members to briefly describe the high points and low points of their week.
- Ask if there are any questions about the growth partnerships. Did any of the partners meet? Ask how it went. Does anyone in the group tonight still need a growth partner? Remind everyone that all of the growth partners should be meeting every week to talk about the two or three growth suggestions that hold the most promise for personal growth. As well, growth partners have been invited to launch into a prayer experiment in which they are praying daily about one thing for each other for eight weeks.
- Conclude by praying for the group. Pray for God's blessing on your evening together.

2. WORD (45 minutes)

LEADERSHIP NOTE: In chapter eleven of *The Shack*, Mack has a conversation with Sophia (Wisdom) about his judgments of other people and God. During the conversation he realizes that his judgements are foolish because his ability to understand situations is so limited. The goal of this weeks discussion is not to chastise our members about their judgements, but rather to give them an opportunity to lay aside their judgements and embrace God's call to love the people around them.

Take time to invite one of the 'readers' in your group' to read aloud page 157-161 (to the line: "He didn't feel like a judge at all, but rather the one on trial.") - Mack's conversation with Sophia about judgement.

What came to your mind when you read this chapter? Did God bring any specific people or situations to your mind that you have made yourself the judge over?

Read Matthew 7.1-6. **What part of the Ray's talk last Sunday have stayed with you this week?**

The God who wants to connect with us is more than a comforter, healer, and cook. He is the Judge of All. This message challenged us all to recognize the sinful tendency we all have to act as though we have the right and ability to judge everyone and everything—even God. This was the temptation that Satan laid before Eve, and he still whispers it into our ears today.

What do you think Jesus means when he says, "Do not judge"? Is there ever a time to judge?

Devaluing others by judging them is not the same thing as recognizing weaknesses, or discerning failures, or calling attention to dangers. In verses 15-20, Jesus urges his listeners to be discerning about false teaching and to identify false prophets. God's people should be clear thinking, discerning, courageous students of life and Scripture who are willing to speak out about the problems and dangers they see.

What is the difference between discernment and devaluing. Discernment allows us to see the areas of error, brokenness and dangers in someone else's lives. When used in a Godly manner, discernment is a wonderful gift from the Lord that allows us to partner with God in helping lead and encourage a brother or sister to greater maturity.

Devaluing is deciding that the people you are judging aren't worth respecting, loving, forgiving, helping, or serving because they are wrong about something high on our list of personal values. When we judge other people, we decide (consciously or not) that these people are fundamentally different than us. Their needs and problems, hopes and dreams aren't any concern of ours. We decide that their lives and ministries, their beliefs and priorities, their families and careers are worth less than ours. In fact, we treat them like they are worth-less . . . WORTHLESS . . . to us. We feel free to slander them, or withhold our help and support. We feel free to hold on to our disappointment in them until it distills into bitterness and we become negative, detached people. We feel free to separate from them, abandon them, and move ahead in life without them . . . these people God created and loves, these people Jesus came to reconcile and save, these people who are pretty much just like us (whose weaknesses, muddled thinking, personal failings, sins aren't a lot worse than our own).

How do you act towards someone you have judged? Do you mock them? Do you gossip and slander them? Do you ignore them? Do you scoff at their lives and ideas? How do you devalue them through your judgement?

Leaders take this time to help your group see (and admit) how destructive their judgement is to the people they judge. Some of us are aggressive and we attack the person face to face and 'get our feelings off our chest'. Others of us are more passive aggressive and we talk about them behind their backs. Still others of us simply ignore them and cut them out of our lives. Sadly this has been seen as a Godly way of living (if you don't have anything nice to say ...), but even ignoring someone because of judgement is not a Godly response to a situation.

Jesus calls people who place themselves in judgement over other people 'hypocrites'. Yikes! Is there anyone in your life that you have been acting like a hypocrite (devaluing them) towards? If so, how could you change your relationship with them to better reflect Jesus' attitude towards them?

One of the greatest tools that we have in our evangelism tool-belt is our ability to ask for forgiveness. When we, as Jesus Followers, trust in God's grace, humble ourselves and ask the forgiveness of those we have sinned against they have the chance to see real life transformation at work. Take a moment and brainstorm with your group about what God could do if they stopped being the judge of the people in their lives (family, neighbors, coworkers, etc.) and instead chose to move toward them in humility.

3. WORSHIP (20 minutes)

- CHOOSE SOME SONGS THAT ARE UPBEAT. Prepare two to three consecutive songs from one music CD. Before your group meets. Find songs that are familiar and easily singable. Make up song sheets with lyrics that are at least 11-12 points in size.
- Explain that weekly meetings will include worship, usually with recorded music. Worship helps us turn Godward in our focus. It renews our faith, softens our hearts, and refreshes our vision.
- Invite several people to begin worship by praising God for some of the good things he has done in their lives. When two or three people have prayed, start the music.
- Turn up your CD player, stereo . . . so loud that everyone can sing without hearing their own voice stand out.

- During worship, ask God to give you some prophetic insights into your group members. When worship concludes, share these prophetic words as blessings. Let the group know that in the weeks ahead, you hope that all of them will use the worship time to listen for encouraging, prophetic words they can with fellow group members. You can lead your group into prophetic, Spirit-filled worship!

4. WIND (25 minutes)

- Ask if there is anyone who is sick or in need of physical healing. If there is, take time to pray as a group for them. Use the 5-step Vineyard prayer model. Use this as a time to build one another up. Encourage people to open their eyes and watch for the Holy Spirit and to open their ears to see if Jesus will give them a word of knowledge for the person. This is our practice time!
- Make room for the gifts of the Spirit to flow—prophetic words, mercy, words of wisdom and counsel, exhortations to faith and obedience, serving, and so on. Invite the entire group to participate in ministry—with their eyes open. Model and explain the Vineyard healing prayer model.

the creator of the world. His whole spirituality is many a mile from those teachers who insisted that the present world was a place of shadows, gloom and vanity, and that true philosophy consisted in escaping it and concentrating on the things of the mind. His teaching grew out of his own experience. When he told his followers not to worry about tomorrow, we must assume he led them by example. He wasn't always looking ahead anxiously, making the present moment count only because of what might come next. No: he seems to have had the skill of living totally in the present, giving attention totally to the present task, celebrating the goodness of God here and now. If that's not a recipe for happiness, I don't know what is.

And he wanted his followers to be the same. When he urged them to make God their priority, it's important to realize which God he's talking about. He's not talking about a god who is distant from the world, who doesn't care about beauty and life and food and clothes. He's talking about the creator himself, who has filled the world with wonderful and mysterious things, full of beauty and energy and excitement, and who wants his human creatures above all to trust him and love him and receive their own beauty, energy and excitement from him.

So when Jesus tells us not to worry about what to eat, or drink, or wear, he doesn't mean that these things don't matter. He doesn't mean that we should prefer (as some teachers have suggested) to eat and drink as little as possible, and to wear the most ragged and disreputable clothes, just to show that we despise such things. Far from it! Jesus liked a party as much as anyone, and when he died the soldiers so admired his tunic that they threw dice for it rather than tearing it up. But the point was again priorities. Put the world first, and you'll find it gets moth-eaten in your hands. Put God first, and you'll get the world thrown in.

Nor does Jesus mean, of course, that we should not plant

seeds and reap harvests, or that we should not work at weaving and spinning to make clothes. Rather, we should do these things with joy, because our God, our father, is the creator of all and wants to feed and clothe us - not gloomily, as though God were a mean tyrant who was out to get us and make life difficult for us. Of course, because we live in a world filled with anxiety, it's easy to let it rub off on us. But the underlying principles of the whole Sermon on the Mount come together at this point in a huge but exhilarating challenge. God's kingdom, and the way of life that goes with it; the 'righteousness', or covenant behaviour, the way of life, that marks out God's people; these are the things you should aim at. Then you'll find that food, drink and clothing look after themselves.

Living totally without worry sounds, to many people, as impossible as living totally without breathing. Some people are so hooked on worry that if they haven't got anything to worry about they worry that they've forgotten something. Here, at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, is an invitation that surprisingly few people even try to take up. Why not learn how to share the happiness of Jesus himself?

MATTHEW 7.1-6

On Judging Others

¹Don't judge people, and you won't be judged yourself. ²You'll be judged, you see, by the judgment you use to judge others! You'll be measured by the measuring-rod you use to measure others! ³Why do you stare at the speck of dust in your neighbour's eye, but ignore the plank in your own? ⁴How can you say to your neighbour, "Here - let me get that speck of dust out of your eye," when you've got the plank in your own? ⁵You're just play-acting! First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you'll see clearly enough to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye.

'Don't give holy things to dogs. Don't throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they will trample them under their feet - and then turn round and attack you!'

William Shakespeare based a whole play on the second verse of Matthew 7. *Measure for Measure* is classified as a 'comedy', and indeed everything works out very well in the end. But much of the play is dark and disturbing.

Angelo, a noble but stern lord, is left in charge of Vienna while Vincentio, the Duke, goes away for a spell. At least, he pretends to go away, but actually he stays near at hand, in disguise. No sooner has Angelo taken power than, obeying the Duke's instructions, he tightens up the ancient laws, condemning to death one Claudio, who has fathered a child out of wedlock. Isabella, the condemned man's sister, pleads for his life, warning Angelo that judgment from God himself is impartial, and that he too may find himself in need of the mercy which God provided in Christ:

Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once;
 And He that might the vantage best have took
 Found out the remedy. How would you be
 If He, which is the top of judgment, should
 But judge you as you are? O, think on that;
 And mercy then will breathe within your lips,
 Like man new made.

Measure for Measure Act 2, Scene 2

Angelo refuses: Claudio must die. But at the same time Angelo is smitten by a passionate lust for Isabella herself, and offers to spare her brother if only she will allow him to have his way with her. The plot twists and turns, but ends with Angelo, his own vice having been exposed, pleading for the death he richly deserves. But the Duke, weaving the threads of the story

together, pardons one and all, while at the same time a deep and rich justice is done.

Shakespeare hints throughout at the Christian meanings of justice and mercy. The sovereign God, who seems to be absent from the world, is in fact present, supremely of course in Jesus himself. He takes human sin and self-righteousness, exposes them and deals with them, and yet allows mercy to triumph gloriously over justice. There is a mystery here which deserves much pondering.

This is the mystery that lies underneath the present passage. Jesus warns sternly against condemning others. Of course, this does not mean (as some have thought) that no follower of Jesus should ever be a magistrate. God intends that his world should be ordered, and that injustice should be held in check. Jesus is referring, not to official lawcourts, but to the judgments and condemnations that occur within ordinary lives, as people set themselves up as moral guardians and critics of one another.

We rightly guess that he had a particular target in mind. In 5.20 he has named them: the scribes and Pharisees. Though we know from history, and from the New Testament itself, that there were many scribes and Pharisees who were genuinely and humbly pious people, the tendency of hard-line pressure-groups - which is what the Pharisees basically were - is always to create a moral climate in which everybody looks at everybody else to see if they are keeping their standards up.

In many countries, this kind of moral climate used to be maintained in relation to sexual morality. Often, today, the moralism is just as fierce, but the target has changed. Today it might be, for instance, conservation and the environment. In some countries, neighbours spy on each other to make sure they place the right kind of garbage in the right kind of bag, so concerned are they about proper disposal and the danger of pollution. That word, in fact, is an indication of what's going

on: 'pollution' was precisely what the Pharisees were afraid of. Jesus warns against all such 'judgment'. He doesn't mean that we shouldn't have high standards of behaviour for ourselves and our world, but that the temptation to look down on each other for moral failures is itself a temptation to play God. And, since we aren't God, that means it's a temptation to play a part, to act, to be a 'hypocrite' (which literally means a play-actor, one who wears a mask as a disguise).

With the warning example of Angelo before us, we can see what will happen to such people. Judgment will bounce back on them, the measuring-stick they use for others will be lined up against them, and, while they patronizingly try to sort out other people's problems, their own will loom so large that they won't be able to see straight. Jesus, we should note, doesn't rule out the possibility that some people will eventually be able to help others to take specks of dust out of their eyes. He isn't saying that there is no such thing as public morality. But he is warning that the very people who seem most eager to tell others what to do (or more likely what not to do) are the people who should take a long look in the mirror before they begin.

What then about the dogs, the pigs and the pearls? Doesn't this imply that Jesus' followers are to make quite a serious judgment - namely that some people come into these categories, so should not be given holy or precious things?

Yes. It seems as though Jesus is here assuming a distinction between one's own community - in his case that of village and town life in Galilee, within the Jewish world of his day - and people from outside. 'Dogs' was after all a regular abusive term for Gentiles; pigs were kept only by Gentiles, since Jews didn't eat pork. He seems to be warning his followers not to try to explain the meaning and life of the kingdom to people who won't even understand the Jewish world within which it makes sense.

If this is right, it fits with what Jesus says later, in 10.5-6. The early mission of the gospel is to Jews only (see too Romans 15.8). After the crucifixion and resurrection, of course, everything is different; the gospel must then go out to embrace the world. For the moment, the disciples are to treasure the gospel like priests in the Temple guarding their holy things. Even though we live today in the new world, commanded to share the gospel riches with all and sundry, it would be good to think we still regarded the message of the kingdom as something sacred and beautiful, to be treasured and valued.

MATTHEW 7.7-12

On Prayer

⁷Ask and it will be given to you! Search and you will find! Knock and the door will be opened for you! ⁸Everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; everyone who knocks will have the door opened. ⁹Don't you see? Supposing your son asks you for bread - which of you is going to give him a stone? ¹⁰Or if he asks for a fish, are you going to give him a serpent? ¹¹Well then: if you know how to give good gifts to your children, evil as you are, how much more will your father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

¹²So whatever you want people to do to you, do just that to them. Yes; this is what the law and the prophets are all about.

I hate fundraising. Many people are good at it; many actually enjoy it; but I can't stand it. I hate asking people for things anyway, and asking for money is the worst of all. As a result, I'm not very good at it. I understand that in some countries it's expected that clergy, and people in similar jobs, should cheerfully ask people to give to good causes. In my world, it always seems difficult and embarrassing.

So when I read a passage like this I find it very hard to believe, and I have to remind myself of what it's based on.