

YOU
CAN'T
JUDGE
ME

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Bullhorn Big Sign Guy

A few years ago, I was walking around downtown Indianapolis on the Saturday night of Memorial Day weekend. In most places around the country, Memorial Day weekend is synonymous with camping, cookouts, or a couple days out on the lake, so a stroll through downtown, past streetlights, store windows, and coffee shops might seem odd compared to the typical traditions of tents, grills, and boats. But in Indianapolis, Memorial Day weekend is all about one thing: the Indianapolis 500.

Most people in Indianapolis call the Indianapolis 500 “the race”. It doesn't require the full title because there is only one race that shuts down the whole city. Thousands of us show up every year, year after year. We wait in traffic for hours and tailgate for a few more before the green flag drops. We gladly lather up with sunscreen in the hope that any rain clouds will divert themselves away from the track. We sit in grandstands and on grassy hills trying to get the best view. But the race has become about way more than just cars circling a track.

A whole month of festivities culminates in the race weekend. A parade on Saturday morning begins a day that ends with black tie events well into the night. Fans stand outside hotels waiting to get a glimpse of celebrities as they move from their sold out hotel to whatever party is next on the list.

On the night of my walk through the city, people were everywhere, seemingly going nowhere and just enjoying the atmosphere. They dodged the cars cruising down the streets and the circle at the center of the city. The four-mile square of downtown is a madhouse. And if you

haven't figured it out yet, I will be very clear: I love every single minute of it.

Speaking of judgment, as I walked through downtown Indy that night before the race-taking in the buzz of energy that shows up that weekend-I saw a guy with a bullhorn and a big sign. Through the noise of the crowd, I couldn't hear anything he said as he yelled into his bullhorn, but his sign was easy to read: I was going to hell because I chose racing over church.

Baking on a metal bleacher in the 90 degree sun, while you try to stay centered on top of a painted on number that was apparently designed only to hold one butt cheek, while you do your best not to feel too intimate with the strange man sitting next to you may very well be the best description of hell imaginable. If his goal was sarcasm, he didn't miss. (Side note, these are also the reasons I upgraded my tickets a couple of years ago. Shade, adequate butt room, and a new set of strangers are genuinely underrated.)

I don't think Bullhorn Big Sign Guy, as I will now call him, was all that worried about the comfortability of my butt, the potential for heat stroke caused by hot sun, or that guy who sat next to me. Sarcasm wasn't Bullhorn Big Sign Guy's goal that night. He had a different focus. He was certain about my eternal fate, an eternal fate he was convinced was secured when I chose a bleacher over a pew on one single Sunday.

Let's be honest, if he were really concerned about me, he would have handed me some sunscreen, a bottle of water, and towel to sit on. He could have offered an "excuse me" for standing in the middle of the sidewalk. Anything would have been better than yelling at me, and a thousand other people, on a Saturday night in the middle of a busy downtown the night before the race.

Why are guys like this so much more worried about where they think you go after you die than what you experience today, and why are they always yelling? When did this become the public face of Christianity? Shouldn't the public face of Christianity be nuns serving the sick, a Jesus-following CEO serving soup in the homeless shelter, or a youth group painting a community center on a Saturday morning? How did we get from Jesus hanging out with prostitutes and tax collectors to guys like Bull Horn Big Sign Guy pronouncing judgment from a street corner while his friends hand out tracts?

What I know for sure is that I wasn't thinking about God's judgment when I read Bullhorn Big Sign Guy's sign because my focus was on his unwelcome judgment. What right does Bullhorn Big Sign Guy have to judge my life? He doesn't even know me.

We're all human, and we've all felt judged. Sometimes that judgment is harmless. We've all had a fail that we hoped nobody saw. We've tripped over sidewalks, spilled coffee on our shirts as we walk into a full day at work, or called someone the wrong name even though we've met them for the tenth time. Most of these things don't feel like a big deal. We don't really care what people think of the old sweats we promised we would throw away. And if your neighbor doesn't like your Christmas lights that have been up for seven months, he can get on his ladder take them down. Sally or is it Sarah?- will eventually get over your short-term memory loss, the stain on your shirt, and the obvious limp as you walked by her desk. Brian -or is it Bob? - is walking in behind you with the same scars from his morning commute.

But judgment isn't that funny when it involves your life story. It isn't funny when judgment begins to collide with things like faith and family. It isn't funny when someone who doesn't know you makes a call on the reality of your soul and looks at you from a judge's seat that you

never gave them permission to occupy. It isn't funny when people who don't actually know anything about your life begin to throw around words like hell and sinner.

That's how I felt with Bullhorn Big Sign Guy. Who is he to judge me? You've probably thought the very same thing at some point about someone else. You might have even said it under your breath as you walked away.

We grew up with the saying that sticks and stones might break our bones, but words will never hurt us. Who came up with that? They must have lived alone. Words do hurt, and their effects are felt long after bones heal. If someone close to you made a judgment call on your life, the scars their comments left are still there.

We've also all heard someone say, "Don't judge someone until you've walked a mile in their shoes." That's actually great advice because whether they are chucks, high heels, or combat boots, they all have their own story to tell.

This is a book about shoes and stories. It's about what happens as we wear those shoes, and walk into each other's lives as our stories collide.

I think Bullhorn Big Sign Guy is doing it wrong. Let's all promise not to be that guy. Let's start by putting our own bullhorns and signs down as we purposely walk with others in their story. You never know where that walk might lead, but it will be worth every step.

Nobody Wins At Monopoly

My wife and I were playing Monopoly with my father in law a few years ago. Our first mistake was playing Monopoly. Nobody who loses that game ever walks away happy they played. The winner usually doesn't feel great either. They gloat about all the money they have and then realize they are gloating over paper money from a board game.

The game was going okay. And by okay, I mean that we were all getting bored of going around and paying each other rent. Then I realized I was going to go bankrupt, and my father in law decided to give me an under-the-table loan. This is apparently against the rules, so my wife called us out on it. The game ended with an argument over following the rules, bending the rules, or if the rules even mattered at all. I told you: Monopoly never ends well.

There's a parallel to the first century because the Pharisees, a religious group of rule keepers, really didn't like Jesus because he didn't play by their rules. Jesus didn't like the way that the Pharisees turned faith into a game of religious control. They went around with the rule book. They weren't really interested in making sure the game was played fair; they were more interested in calling someone out when they broke the rules.

This tension between Jesus and the Pharisees leads to one of the most famous stories about judgment found in the Bible.

John 8:2-11

2 At dawn, he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. 3 The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group 4 and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5 In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now, what do you say?” 6 They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” 8 Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.

10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

11 “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared.

We don’t know much about this woman. We don’t get her name or her status in society. This woman is not a person to them but a tool in their game of trying to trap Jesus. Look how they talk about her. “In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now, what do you say?”

Such women. That woman. That girl. Whoever she is.

This woman no longer has a name. She isn’t seen as a child of God. They take a made-in-the-image-of-God someone and makes her a something.

If you haven't experienced this, you've at least witnessed this before where someone is labeled "one of those kinds of people." She isn't someone struggling with a broken and harmful sexual relationship. Nope, to them, she is just a statistic, a problem, a nameless face that has no hope, no future, and would be better off dead.

...But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the FIRST to throw a stone at her."

I love what Jesus does here. The concept of stoning was a form of capital punishment which left everyone guilt free because nobody knows which stone actually caused death. Nobody wanted to throw the first stone because that's not the way mob punishment works. Jesus says it's time to be done with this mob mentality. They don't get to be anonymous judges anymore. Instead, Jesus views them as individuals because that's how he sees her. Jesus sees the mob as a collection of someones because he sees the woman they are accusing as a someone.

While the Pharisees saw this woman as just a sinner who had no chance of redemption, Jesus saw something different. Jesus didn't see this woman as just another statistic, a nameless face for a group of people. He doesn't see her defined by the sin of adultery. She isn't a sin. She's a person.

The church has a bad reputation. I'm sure that's not a surprise. The church has a reputation for being judgmental and hateful about all kinds of things. The problem is that this means the church looks a lot more like the Pharisees than Jesus. Somewhere we lost the point.

What if the church was the safest place to go if your life was a mess?

But what if there was more? What if it was even better than that?

What if the church was the place that saw you as a someone struggling with sin but didn't leave you there? In a world that wants to look at you as a something, what if the church looked at you as a someone-made-in-the- image-of-God. And, what if the church was the place that helped you become all that God had created you to be? What if in the midst of our lowest point, the church was the safest place and the safest people to be around?

That's all possible if we would first put down our rule books and stones.

All The Wrong Chords

I was playing guitar a few years ago in a band. The drummer counted out the start of the song, and we all started to play. Something sounded way off, so I started looking around trying to figure out what was going on. I couldn't believe these musicians sounded so bad until I realized I was the one playing in the wrong key.

I was judging everyone else by my standards when they weren't even trying to play the same thing as me. Remember my friend with the bullhorn and sign? He was doing the same thing to the people in the city that night. He didn't know who followed Jesus, but he treated everyone as if they did. He was holding a unique group of individuals to a single set of standards.

The follower of Jesus named Paul started a bunch of churches. One of these churches was in a city called Corinth. It was kind of like the Greek version of Las Vegas. All kinds of crazy stuff happened in Corinth, so Paul was trying to help people figure out how to live like Jesus in a city like that.

Paul gets news that something is going on in Corinth. He feels compelled to address it because even people outside the church think what's going on is gross. And if they think it's gross, it must be really gross. By addressing this situation, Paul gives us some insight into how Jesus followers should respond to people who aren't Jesus followers.

1 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father's wife. 2 And you are proud!

Let's translate. Not that we have much to translate. Paul is saying, "You think this is cool. You guys are walking around telling 'that's what she said' jokes, laughing about this guy's messed up situation."

The whole thing sounds like a scene from a day-time talk show, and everyone is just laughing about it. Paul's got a different approach to this.

1 Corinthians 5:2-3

Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this? 3 For my part, even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. As one who is present with you in this way, I have already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this.

Paul doesn't tell this church not to judge, he tells them who to judge. This guy has signed up as a believer. He is part of the Jesus people. And Paul says because of that he is held to a different standard of behavior. What he says next might sound kind of strange, but it makes a lot of sense.

1 Corinthians 5:4-5

4 So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, 5 hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.

Paul is saying to confront this guy. If he wants to do things that are the antithesis of God stuff (the opposite of God stuff being what he calls Satan stuff) let him go do that and see where it gets him. This doesn't seem loving, but it's the most loving thing they can do.

One way to think of this is with kids. You can tell them over and over again to stop doing something before they get hurt, and they might not listen. Eventually, though, they get hurt, and they realize it was a bad idea. But when they get hurt, you don't say, "stupid kid...I told you so." No...you pick them up and hold them and tell them everything will be okay.

Paul is saying that sometimes you have to let people deal with their stuff on their own. It sucks. They get hurt. But sometimes rock bottom is where they figure out they need a change. Paul is hopeful that the guy will give up what was hurting him (that's that whole destruction of the flesh part) and accept God's grace in his life.

Paul doesn't know how this is going to turn out, so he goes on and references an earlier letter he wrote to the people in Corinth and clears something up. In the process, he helps us understand how this judgment thing should work.

1 Corinthians 5:9-12

9 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— 10 not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. 11 But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people. 12 What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those

inside? 13 God will judge those outside.

Paul says something we all learned a long time ago but something we forgot: mind your own business. Well, at least when it comes to people outside the church. If someone doesn't claim to follow Jesus why would you hold them to the standards of following Jesus? But if someone claims to follow Jesus, why would you want them to act like they don't follow Jesus?

I don't care what your kids do...they aren't my kids. I do care what my kids do. If I am eating out at a restaurant and my daughter is yelling and throwing food and running under the table, I'm going to discipline her. But if your kids are doing the same thing, while I might want to discipline them, I won't. First, because I don't want to go to jail. But, more importantly, because they aren't my child. I've got enough to worry about with my own kids,, and I don't need to worry about yours.

You've Got Something In Your Eye

Too many Christians have spent their lives expecting non-Jesus followers to act like Jesus followers, but they forgot about themselves. We have a word for this, and that word is hypocrite.

Jesus talked a lot about hypocrites and hypocritical living because, just like in our time, a lot of religious people were super concerned with what everyone else was doing but had a tough time looking in the mirror. Jesus talked about this in the book of Matthew.

Matthew 7:1

1 “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

So there it is. This is the statement that we have all heard and one that most of us have used at some point in our lives. We say it all the time, “You can’t judge me.” And, if we’re feeling religious, we will give the context and say “You can’t judge me because Jesus said not to judge.” We would be right to say that if that was all Jesus said on the topic and if that was the point. But as you know, you can’t just pull a verse out of its context. Let’s look at else Jesus had to say and see what he’s trying to teach the crowd who gathered to listen to him.

Matthew 7:1

1 “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it

will be measured to you.

This reminds me of something Jesus said earlier in Sermon on the Mount (that's what this section of scripture is often called). When Jesus talked about giving, praying, and fasting he said there were these people he called hypocrites who would take the spiritual things and use them to try to impress others. Listen to how Jesus talked about these hypocrites and their approach to prayer.

Matthew 6:5

5 "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

The reward they sought was to be seen by others, and that's exactly what they got. It's a pretty shallow reward compared to what prayer is supposed to be about, but they got what they wanted. I think Jesus is saying the same kind of thing here in a different way.

Matthew 7:1

1 "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

What Jesus is saying is that there is a way that we can look at other people, and if we choose to live that way we will end up receiving the same thing. We can judge others, meaning we condemn them, think of them as less than, and that's how people will view us. But for Jesus, there is an entirely different way to live. Remember, the sermon on the mount is Jesus's teaching on a new way to live. It is upside down from

the way we usually approach life. So Jesus gives a different way to live.

Matthew 7:3-5

3 “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? 4 How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

Have you ever had something in your eye before? It hurts! You want help to get it out of your eye. Maybe someone can give you a cup of water or some eye-drops. If you’re desperate enough, you might do that thing where you pull down your eyelid and maybe quickly, and squeamishly, flick it out of your eyes.

But now imagine a different scenario, imagine the scene as you’re standing there in pain in your driveway. You are half-blinded by the speck of sawdust in your eye and up walks a guy with a 2x4 rammed through his skull. First of all, you’re wondering how the guy is alive and why he is walking around the neighborhood. You’re also wondering why he isn’t at the hospital. What you’re probably not thinking is that he’s going to start pointing out that it appears you have something stuck in your eye. Because that would be ridiculous. That is exactly Jesus’s point.

How many of you have flown a commercial flight before? How many of you have actually listened to the in-flight safety talk? Not a lot of us have actually listened to the talk. We sit down, put our seatbelt on, put on our headphones, and we hope nobody starts talking to us. If you don’t follow that order, please realize you are the person everyone is hoping doesn’t talk to them. Okay, that’s not the point. The point is we don’t listen to the safety talk because we don’t think anything is going to

happen and we already think we know the talk. But do we really know it?

We do the same thing when it comes to judgment. We think we know what the Bible says about judging others, so we don't really pay attention to what it really means. Because of this, two camps of judging that have developed. The first camp says we should judge everyone and the second camp tells us we shouldn't judge anyone. Jesus actually gives us a third-way approach that is so much better. Read that talk real quick and see the parallel:

“Oxygen and the air pressure are always being monitored. In the event of a decompression, an oxygen mask will automatically appear in front of you. To start the flow of oxygen, pull the mask towards you. Place it firmly over your nose and mouth, secure the elastic band behind your head, and breathe normally. Although the bag does not inflate, oxygen is flowing to the mask. If you are traveling with a child or someone who requires assistance, secure your mask on first, and then assist the other person.”

The truth is, we are all desperate for air. We are all struggling at different points, but we can't do anything for anyone else if we don't first address ourselves. This world is tough, and all of us deal with temptation, sin, and painful situations. If we are going to help each other, we need to be in the position to do just that. Once you deal with your own sin and recognize the grace necessary in your own life, then you will be qualified to know how to help walk with someone in theirs. Now you can come alongside and say, “Hey, I know what you are dealing with. I have been there before.”

And then, after all of this, Jesus says what might be the strangest thing recorded in the entire Bible.

Matthew 7:6

6 “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.

Now, the problem with this part of the teaching is that it seems like a sudden shift. We went from judging, planks, and specks to throwing pearls to pigs. This isn't something I was tempted to do in the first place. Has this been a problem for you? Were a lot of people throwing pearls at pigs? It seems like a strange issue to address. What does this have to do with judging?

Judging is basically all about manipulation. It's trying to control someone else. We don't like the choices a person makes, so we judge them. We may try to manipulate another person through negative means like shame and condemnation. But judging isn't always like that. Sometimes, judgment, the most hurtful kind, is found in the kindest words. Condemnation is its ugliest when it is accompanied by a smile.

Judging is about living with incredible anxiety about everyone else. For many of us, that anxiety has been made worse by the reality that you have lived with all sorts of issues in your own life you've been afraid to address: it's easier to judge everyone else, but it's so exhausting.

Jesus has a better way for us to live.

Jesus wants us to be a community that doesn't leave anyone behind. We address the issues in our lives first, and then we look back to find someone struggling with the same thing and offer our help. We

don't raise ourselves over anyone else. We don't push anyone away. We don't talk about them behind their backs. We don't condemn them with a smile on our face.

Instead, we come to the cross. We drag our own planks, lay them at the cross, and entrust ourselves and entrust others to God and His grace that works in ways we could never imagine.

What if we started there? What if as followers of Jesus when we saw sin that needed to be addressed in a fellow Jesus followers life, we began by looking in the mirror? Can you imagine how different the world would look?

Wandering Sheep

When we learn about not judging others, it feels uncomfortable because we've been told time and time again that we're not supposed to judge. But learning about the "right" kind of judgment feels uncomfortable for the same reason. It feels unloving. But here is the truth: not helping someone with a situation that you know will lead to an experience of pain isn't love, it is indifference. Indifference says, "I don't care if it hurts you because it isn't me." That's not friendship or love. That's not even hate. That's literally not caring at all about our brothers and sisters. If you want to love people, you're going to have to learn how to judge and how to help. Thankfully, Jesus gave us a guide.

Matthew 18:12-14

12 "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? 13 And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. 14 In the same way, your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish (or be lost)."

This thing about the hundred sheep is pretty popular with church people. We love to talk about God as the one who goes to find us when we wander off. But - and here is where this gets uncomfortable for us - we are expected to be the shepherd too because here is what Jesus said next.

15 "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. 16 But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony

of two or three witnesses.’ 17 If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church;”

We are actually really good at this. Well, at least the last part. We’re all guilty of spreading rumors, talking about people’s sins behind their backs, and talking about how people hurt us. What we don’t do well is follow the actual pattern Jesus gave.

Jesus expects us to talk things out in person. Take the plank out of your eye and then talk to them about that sawdust in theirs. If they won’t listen, you don’t ignore it. It’s going to cause them pain, and it needs to be addressed. And, while we think this sounds painful, it’s something we all know about: Jesus says the next step is gathering some friends and confronting the issue.

Jesus is telling us to have an intervention. Either he is way ahead of his time, or we have finally figured out things that we could have figured out long ago: things we would have known if we had actually read our Bibles instead of being scared of passages like this.

Again, Jesus is talking about people who believe. We are not going to non-believers and having interventions. This is about believers. And why does this matter? 1. We shouldn’t want people to live hypocritical lives. 2. We should want people to become the person that God created them to be and not the lie that sin is telling them about themselves. But what about this part about treating them as a pagan or a tax collector? Sounds harsh.

And this does seem harsh until we remember how Jesus treated pagans and tax collectors.

He didn't treat them like insiders, but he loved them. And this is the hard part. Their sin is going to catch up with them, and you will not be there to hold it over them. You will be there to catch them and show them love, grace, and forgiveness.

I am not saying this is going to be perfect. In fact, in the context of judgment, we find Jesus saying this just a few verses later.

19 "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.
20 For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

The reason this is here is that Jesus is saying that our world has sold us a lie about judging others. And Jesus has given us a third way. Not to judge those outside our sphere of influence, not to judge those who don't believe, but to love each other so much that we will not be indifferent to those we love. He is asking us to embrace difficult conversations and help rescue each other from the pain of sin. And if we are willing to do that God will be with us through it.

We need community, relationships, and people who will carry our burdens when we don't have the strength to walk another step of faith. We don't need people talking about us for the sake of stabbing us in our backs. We need people catching us when we fall because that's the way of Jesus. And that kind of community could very well change the world.

So, let's throw our bullhorns, signs, planks, and rocks on the floor. And let's lose the condemnation accompanied by a smile. It's exhausting to judge others and doesn't help anyone. Let's embrace the way of Jesus and be the kind of people and community this world so desperately needs.