The Gospel of John:  *Judge Rightly*
John 7:19-24

9 Has not Moses given you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why do you seek to kill me?” 20 The crowd answered, “You have a demon! Who is seeking to kill you?”  21 Jesus answered them, “I did one work, and you all marvel at it. 22 Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. 23 If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well? 24 Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.”

My message this morning will fall under four subheadings: 1) The Hypocrisy of Self-Righteousness; 2) Dealing with Insults and Ignorance; 3) Seeing the Forest Through the Trees; and 4) Judge Rightly.

### I. The Hypocrisy of Self-Righteousness

Before we jump into what Jesus says here in vs. 19, we must remember where we are. If you recall, hundreds of thousands of Jews from all over the ancient middle-east have assembled in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles as they did every autumn. We learned last week that Jesus waited until the middle of the feast before suddenly appearing in the temple where He begins to teach. The Jewish authorities marvel at His teaching and publicly question His credentials. Last week we heard how Jesus responded, making it clear that His teaching was not His own original ideas; Jesus was teaching only that which He received from the Father.

Now, let me also remind you of more context that is really important as we approach vs. 19. If you recall, back in John 5, Jesus healed a man bound to a mat for 38 years…but He healed the man on the Sabbath. When the Jewish authorities confronted Jesus about healing a man on the Sabbath, Jesus responded in 5:17, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.” And John observed there in 5:18, “And this was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father.”

So, here in John 7, these same Jewish authorities have just interrupted Jesus to question His credentials. Jesus knows what they are thinking…He knows what the real issue is, and He does not ignore the elephant in the room. He knows they are still angry at Him for healing the man on the Sabbath. He knows they are plotting to kill Him. So, here in John 7, Jesus has essentially returned to the scene of the crime and to face His prosecutors. His defense begins with vs. 19 when He says: Has not Moses given you the law? *Yet none of you* keeps the law.

I think we should pause here, because I’m pretty sure Jesus paused here! I’m pretty sure Jesus let that last sentence soak in for just a minute. *None of you* keeps the law. Now, remember who Jesus is talking to. Jesus is talking to the Pharisees…the most devoted “rule followers” in all of Israel. He is talking to the Temple authorities…the most highly esteemed people in the country! He is talking to members of the Sanhedrin…the equivalent of the United States Supreme Court!

So, picture the scene: Jesus addresses all the officials; all of the lawyers and senators and representatives and even the Supreme Court Justices themselves; and He judges THEM! He declares them GUILTY of breaking the law. Why? Because Jesus has the authority to judge.
If you recall, Jesus said back in John 5, “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son.” Jesus is the Judge. Jesus has the authority to judge the world…including this pompous group of Pharisees with their long robes and their tassels and their phylacteries (see Matt. 23). And here is His judgment: they are all guilty! None of them have kept the law!

Now, can you imagine the indignation of these self-righteous men? Jesus, the uneducated peasant from Nazareth has declared them guilty of breaking the law in front of this huge festival crowd in the temple courts. Can you imagine their faces? No doubt they looked shocked, angered and offended! How dare Jesus accuse them of not keeping the law! Their whole lives have been devoted to keeping the law! Just like so many of us, they are now recalling all the rules they have followed. They are comparing themselves to all the really bad people they know, and they are deeply offended! They are justifying in their minds just how good they have been and how unappreciated they feel!

But then Jesus drops the hammer! Look at what He says at the end of vs. 19, “Why do you seek to kill me?” Can you feel the irony?

These men, who are so offended by Jesus, have been working on their “assassination plan”…all for the glory of God! Isn’t that ironic? As Jesus said to the Pharisees and rulers in Matthew 23:24, “You strain at a gnat and swallow a camel!”

Church, don’t miss this: the anger of the self-righteous is rooted in blind hypocrisy. I say blind because to be a truly self-righteous person, you must turn a blind eye toward your own sinful attitudes and behaviors…which is exactly what these men have done. They have been so incensed with what Jesus said and did that they failed to recognize their own sin…they conveniently failed to see that plotting an assassination is in no way in accordance with the Law of Moses!

Friends, take this teaching to heart. No one has kept God’s law. Every one of us is guilty of breaking God’s law, and our crimes are considered “capital offenses” by God…punishable by death. That knowledge alone should keep us humble. That knowledge alone should make us think twice before we pick up our gavels to condemn another person.

Sadly, no matter how many times I tell you that we are all lawbreakers…that we all deserve hell on our best day…many of you will still think secretly in your hearts, “Sure, but those people sure deserve hell more than I do!” We’re all a little self-righteous, right?

I’m sorry…what’s that? You don’t think you are self-righteous? That’s not really your problem? Maybe. I’m going to channel my inner Jeff Foxworthy here, and we’re going to play a little game. It’s called, “You might be a self-righteous hypocrite!” Let’s see if any of these scenarios apply:

If you regularly say, “I know I’m not perfect, but…” and then you go on to magnify the sinful behavior of another person…you might be a self-righteous hypocrite!
If you find it very hard to forgive your spouse for something they said or did 5 years ago but you can’t recall your own sin from yesterday…you might be a self-righteous hypocrite.

If you condemn a local pastor for his faulty theology and go on to assassinate his character, you might be a self-righteous hypocrite.

If you rebuke your children for the behavior you constantly model, you might be a self-righteous hypocrite.

If you truly believe that your contribution to your marital issues PALES in comparison to your spouse’s…you might be a self-righteous hypocrite.

If you regularly think it’s your God-given duty to “share what you’ve heard” about the neighbor down the street, you might be a self-righteous hypocrite.

If you are easily irritated, regularly offended, and generally convinced that most people are idiots, you ARE a self-righteous hypocrite!

Listen…self-righteousness is a very common disorder. You don’t even need to believe in God to be self-righteous…you just need to be convinced that you are more RIGHT than everyone else around you, and there you have it! Church…be careful of this pernicious disease. Nothing is more deadly to our mission than to become blind hypocrites, such that we become persecutors and destroyers of the very people Jesus died to save! As Jesus said in Matthew 7:5, let us attend to the log in our own eye before we attempt to aid another with the speck in theirs. Amen? Let us now consider my second subheading:

II. Dealing with Insults and Ignorance

Now, before we move on to our Lord’s second line of defense, we must first deal with the interruption that comes from the crowd. This is a different audience than those whom Jesus has been addressing. These are the average Jewish pilgrims in town for the festival who have been listening to Jesus out of context. In vs. 20 the crowd reacts to the question Jesus just asked. John reports: The crowd answered, “You have a demon! Who is seeking to kill you?”

The “crowd” is clueless. The pilgrims in town for the Festival were not around several months ago when Jesus healed the paralytic on the Sabbath. They haven’t been informed of the assassination plot. So, naturally, they think Jesus has paranoid delusions…they assume he must have a demon. As we’ll see in a minute, Jesus does not even address this very hurtful accusation from the crowd. He understands their ignorance, and He doesn’t waste time and energy trying to correct them. His argument is with the temple leaders, so He remains focused and continues His defense. Now, I’ll get back to His defense in just a moment…but first, let us admire the incredible patience of Jesus. Here we have the second person of the Trinity; the Lion of Judah; the Alpha and the Omega; the only Man who has ever lived who was truly innocent, perfect, without blemish, and completely misunderstood…and yet He patiently bears with these people who are ignorant and hurtful. Church…tell me you love Jesus! When we observe our Lord showing such patience and mercy to those who are so insulting, it should make us love Him all
the more, amen? Secondly, let us follow our Lord’s example. People who are ignorant of all the facts will often make snap judgments and say hurtful things. If you are a leader of any kind, you know what I’m talking about. Leaders often know things that the general crowds of people do not…and quite often leaders are not at liberty to share everything they know. Nevertheless, those we lead often think they understand the situation, and they jump to conclusions. They rip off an email that says something along the lines of “You are an idiot! You have a demon!” I’ve received my fair share of those emails in 30 years of leadership…and sometimes I deserved them! Sometimes I failed to communicate clearly; sometimes I was responsible for the ignorant response of the people I was charged to lead. However, many times people jumped to conclusions and made hurtful comments about situations that they knew little about, and I could not give them all the information. Those were times when I struggled mightily with how to respond. I was wounded by their comments, but I either did not have the time, the access, or the permission to share the information that my accusers needed in order to see the situation for what it was.

Listen Church: When someone jumps to a conclusion and makes hurtful comments about you out of ignorance, remember the patience of our Savior. Jesus understood and modeled here how to respond in those times when you simply can’t bring the whole world up to speed on all the facts. In those times, followers of Jesus…and particularly those in leadership…must be patient. We must anticipate hurtful judgments and errant conclusions from those who lack all the facts. I have learned that most of the time, if you will bite your tongue and not overreact to the hurtful words of “well-intended people,” the truth will finally come out and those who said such horrible things will circle back and apologize, or at least amend their opinion of you. However, when we strike back at people who hurt us, regardless of the facts, we compromise our witness and we often make matters worse. Part of being a good leader is learning to endure seasons of being misunderstood…those seasons are inevitable. Here in John 7 Jesus has modeled the appropriate response: be patient, let those comments roll off your back, and stick to the matter at hand, amen? I can’t see your faces, but I KNOW that many of you are in this situation right now…so hang in there and follow the lead of our Savior. Let us now look to my third subheading:

III. Seeing the Forest

Returning to Jesus’ defense, let’s pick up the dialogue beginning in vs. 21: Jesus said to them, “I did one work, and you all marvel at it. Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man’s whole body well? Do not judge by appearances, but judge with the right judgment.”

OK…how many of you have ever heard the expression “that person can’t see the forest on account of the trees?” The expression is full of irony. It refers to people who can’t see the big picture because of preoccupation with the minutia. That is essentially the argument that Jesus just made. Let’s unpack what Jesus just said and I think you’ll “see the forest!”

First, Jesus is pointing out some irony: the Jewish authorities are up in arms because Jesus “broke the Sabbath” on one occasion, when in fact these very authorities regularly break the Sabbath every week. How do they break the Sabbath? They willingly circumcise male children on the Sabbath, which is non-essential work, right? How do they justify circumcising male children on the Sabbath? Listen to what Jesus said.
Jesus says, “Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses but from the fathers)…” In other words, circumcision is older than the law of Moses. The instruction regarding circumcision was given to Abraham in Genesis 17 and passed on through Isaac and Jacob…the patriarchs…who are “the fathers.” According to the ancient covenant of circumcision, the male child was to be circumcised on the 8th day of his life as a sign and seal God’s covenant with Israel.

Well, if a child was born on a Sabbath day, he would need to be circumcised on the eighth day, which was the next Sabbath day, right? So, in order to honor God’s covenant instructions…in order to physically set apart a child as one belonging to God under the promises of the covenant, the Temple leaders would frequently “break the Sabbath” to circumcise male children. In fact, a male child who was not circumcised was deemed “cut off from his people.”

So Jesus begs the question: if you will set aside the Sabbath to surgically remove a piece of skin as a means of bringing a man into covenant fellowship, does it not make sense to set aside the Sabbath to heal a man’s whole body and restore him to covenant fellowship?

We must remember: a paralytic was not allowed in the temple courts. He was considered cursed and unclean…he was cut off from his people. You might recall that shortly after Jesus healed the paralytic in John 5, He found the man in the temple (vs. 14)! That was likely the first time the man had ever entered the temple! The healing had restored the man into fellowship…accomplishing essentially the same end as circumcision for a male child.

Thus, Jesus equates healing the man as at least as important and in line with the intent of circumcision…a practice the Jewish leaders broke the Sabbath, to observe, on a weekly basis. Now, that may seem like a technical argument, but it is spot on and effective. These religious leaders have completely missed the forest of God’s redemptive work due to their preoccupation with the ridiculous minutia surrounding Sabbath codes.

We should also assume that Jesus did not see His action of healing the paralytic as “breaking the Sabbath” at all.

In Mark 2:27 Jesus says, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” I like the way the New Living Translation reads: The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath.

I think our text here illustrates the point Jesus was trying to make in Mark 2. If the Sabbath created a context where a man’s life could be restored to wholeness by the healing power of Jesus, wasn’t that actually the point of the Sabbath in the first place? The Sabbath was put in place by God to benefit people…to lead them to a life of fullness, balance, worship, and restoration…all of which was accomplished that day when Jesus healed the man and told him to pick up his mat and walk!

Jesus can see the forest…and I hope you can see the forest…but bless their hearts, the Jewish leaders could only see the trees! Let me wrap up with a brief reflection on the last thing Jesus said…
IV. Judge Rightly

In the final sentence of his defense, Jesus says, “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.”

The first part of His imperative is pretty clear: Do not judge by appearances. Jesus is the Messiah, and even now here in John 7 Jesus is fulfilling the Messianic prophecy found in Isaiah 11:3-4: And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth…”

Church, Jesus is speaking truth straight from Heaven: do not judge by appearances. This is where we get the old adage, “You can’t judge a book by its cover.” Confession time: how many of us still judge a book by its cover? I’m guilty as charged! I judge books by their covers all the time! I would like to say I don’t judge by appearances, but I still do…I suspect you do as well.

Church, don’t brush off this teaching of Jesus as though it’s something you’ve heard a thousand times and you get it…I suspect we actually don’t get it. Truth be told, we are more inclined to jump to a conclusion based on appearances today than ever before in history. We watch one video on YouTube, and we think we are an authority. We allow FOX or CNN to make up our minds for us rather than listening to both sides of an issue. We see a person with a nose-ring or some very obvious tattoo and we think we know something about that person. We see the color of a person’s skin and we immediately jump to a conclusion about that person’s family or socio-economic status. In the world of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, we are constantly making judgments based on appearance…and Jesus just said in no uncertain terms: STOP IT! Do NOT judge by appearances…appearances do not tell us the whole story.Appearances do not provide the context necessary to make a reasonable judgment as to how things are.

Now…I know what a lot of you young people are thinking right now! You are thinking: we shouldn’t be judging at all! Every Disney movie you have ever watched has taught you that “judging” is wrong, right? I hear you friends. I get that people, and often “religious people,” have so often been hurtful, cruel, and even oppressive with their snap judgments based upon appearances, prejudice, and self-righteousness. I get what you are saying, and I understand.

But listen to what Jesus says here in John 7: Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment. Do not judge poorly…but judge rightly!

Listen to me carefully now: it would be inaccurate to say that the Bible always teaches us “not to judge.” Some judging is necessary…but it must be RIGHT judging. “But didn’t Jesus say not to judge in the Sermon on the Mount?” Yes…I’m glad you mentioned that!

Jesus taught us in Matthew 7:1, “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.” Jesus is clearly teaching us to be careful how we judge because the standard we use to condemn others will be the standard that He will turn back on ourselves. How would you like to be judged with the same standard you so often judge others with? Horrifying, right?
Jesus goes on, saying, “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”

Jesus is clearly condemning self-righteous, hypocritical judgments. This is exactly what He just said in John 7. We shall not judge POORLY based upon appearances, blinded by our own hypocrisy! We are to avoid snap judgments; we are to avoid judging another person as though we have no sin. We must deal with our own sin before we even think about “helping” another person with their sin.

But now listen to how Jesus concludes that teaching with these words at the end of Matthew 7: “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot, and turn and attack you.”

Did you hear what He just said? Failure to judge rightly may lead to the holy and pure things of the world getting trampled and people getting hurt.

Young people, you will make a judgement about another person before you decide to marry that person…you had best judge rightly. Parents, you will make a judgement about a person before you allow them to watch your kids while you are away for a week…you definitely want to judge rightly. Business leaders, you will make a judgement about the person you are about to hire, or the person you are wanting to go into a business deal with…poor judgment will be costly…you will want to judge rightly.

Judging…using “right judgment,” is something we all do every day. But what standard do you use to make your judgments? Are you judging by appearances? Are you going with your gut? Here’s what Jesus said: when you judge, judge with right judgment.

Now, what does that mean? What does it mean to judge with right judgment? That is for me to know and you to find out! Just kidding…I don’t know that I can tell you exactly what that means in five minutes or less, and Jesus doesn’t unpack “right judgment” here in our text.

I think, however, that we can draw some general conclusions based on what we have seen today. Let me start with the earthy, practical things that we can learn from the text, and I’ll finish with some deeper stuff at the end.

1) Don’t jump to conclusions and call people “demon possessed” when you are new to the conversation! Nine times out of ten, we only see a very small part of a much bigger scenario when we first enter into a relationship or a conflict. We are all inclined to make a quick judgement based upon anecdotal evidence, but our first impression is not always accurate. I have learned this truth the hard way after years of counseling couples! No matter how one person in the marriage portrays the relationship, there are always two sides to the story. Better to ask questions, listen carefully, and assume there is a lot you don’t know before jumping to a quick judgment about people or situations. As we read in James 1:19, “Let every person be quick to listen and slow to speak.”
2) Give leaders with integrity the benefit of the doubt before jumping to conclusions. Jesus had never sinned against anyone…ever! He compassionately healed a man who was bound to a mat for 38 years. He spoke the truth every time He opened His mouth. He lived His life to serve others and to bring hope to the world. In short, He had a pretty good track record! So, when it appeared that Jesus may have broken the Sabbath law, people exercising “right judgment” should have given Jesus the benefit of the doubt that He was acting in accordance with God’s intent, regardless of appearances, right? People exercising “right judgment” should have approached Jesus and said, “Jesus, you have always been a leader with integrity. So help us to understand why you healed this man on the Sabbath; and how you understand that action in light of God’s law. We are assuming you have your reasons, and we are assuming…based on your track record…that you care about God’s will and purposes as much as we do.”

Listen Church: I can tell you from personal experience that every leader with integrity EXPECTS to be questioned and called to give an account for why they said what they said or made the decisions they made. No good leader seeks to escape or avoid accountability. Good leaders actually want “right judgment”…even when they make mistakes. However, leaders with integrity also expect to be asked good questions and provided the opportunity to defend their decisions before snap judgments are rendered and emails are sent! Thou shalt send no nasty email to the leader before asking good questions and listening carefully…pretty sure that’s in the Bible! Seriously, give your best leaders in any field the benefit of the doubt before jumping to conclusions…that’s part of judging with right judgment.

3) Judge according to God’s ultimate end. What is God’s ultimate end? To reconcile the world unto Himself! To bring glory to Himself! To redeem sin-sick and condemned souls! So, no matter how bad a situation gets, right judgment demands that we consider God’s ultimate end in the lives of people. Sometimes that means that we need to fire a person who is cheating the company, even though he is beloved and performs at a high level. God’s ultimate end demands that if person is not willing to repent and make amends for his wrongdoing, he needs to feel the natural consequences of his sinful behavior in hopes that he will repent and seek God’s face for forgiveness. On the other hand, sometimes an underperforming employee needs additional training and a second chance on a project in order to flourish as a valuable employee in the years to come. Right judgment then requires us to go the extra mile, to put in the extra hours for coaching and encouragement, because God’s ultimate end is to use this person’s life and work to bring glory to Himself. If you are not even asking the question of God’s ultimate end in the lives of the people you are dealing with, you are NOT employing right judgment. That was clearly the case with the Temple leaders in John 5 and again here in John 7, right? They didn’t give a rip about God’s ultimate end for the paralytic…or Jesus for that matter…so they judged wrongly.

4) Fear the Lord. Fear the Lord more than any man or any situation. Fear what the Lord thinks about a person or a situation even more than what your friends or your family think. We know that God is the ultimate Judge. God’s Word and God’s Law are the final and ultimate standard by which all of us will one day be judged. So it stands to reason that before we do our earthly “judging,” we should first consult The Judge and His Law. We should pray and ask God to give us His wisdom through the power and prompting of the Holy Spirit. And we need always to remember that God’s judgement upon sinful humanity was finally expressed in sending His perfect Son to die in our place so that we might be forgiven! The fear of the Lord means we
always keep these things in mind before rendering any kind of a judgment. Making a judgement about a person or a situation is daunting work. Oftentimes our judgments can have very serious consequences, so we should always do the work of “judging” with tremendous care…and that begins with the fear of the Lord.

I think there is more we could say about judging with right judgment, but let’s stop there for today. I know this is a hard subject, but let’s remember that Jesus is our authority. Jesus is our leader and our teacher, so we do well to take His words to heart.

One more thing before we close: some of us have a lot of pain in our past. Due to our pain, our trauma, or our wounds, we tend to be angry most of the time! We are easily triggered, and so our judgments are often a bit cruel and often damaging to our relationships. If what I said describes your personality, I want to encourage you to seek some help through our network of Christian counselors. Jesus can and will heal those broken parts that cause you and others so much pain, but it will take some intentionality and some help to get there. Again…pray about what I am saying, and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. The more healing we experience in our hearts and minds, the more we will judge rightly. You can find our list of approved counselors on our website, colonialkc.org. Just click on ministries, hope and healing, and then the “counseling” tab.

Church, in closing…I just want to say thank you for your love and care for me as your pastor. I received dozens of cards this week for my 50th birthday, a wonderful meal, and an 8 pack of toilet paper…it was my best birthday ever! I love you, and I thank God for you! Just wanted you to know. Let’s pray.