



Breaking Free: The Path from Judgment to Joy **by Brett Dabe**

Scripture:

““Don’t judge, so that you won’t be judged. For with whatever judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but don’t consider the beam that is in your own eye? Or how will you tell your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye,’ and behold, the beam is in your own eye? You hypocrite! First remove the beam out of your own eye, and then you can see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother’s eye.” Matthew 7:1-5 WEBUS

INTRODUCTION TO TODAY’S MESSAGE:

I want to begin today by asking a question. How many of you have ever watched a mother struggle with her crying toddler who gets out of control? What was your first thought? "If that were my child, I would handle this so differently?" Almost immediately? I have had that happen countless times, however, I also began to feel the gentle nudge of the Holy Spirit—that reminder that I had just done exactly what we're going to talk about today: I had judged someone without knowing their story.

Have you ever caught yourself doing something similar? Maybe it was something small. Or perhaps it was something more significant—watching a friend make a decision you strongly disagreed with, or seeing a family member handle a situation in a way you would never choose. That quick internal commentary that whispers, "I would never do it that way. That subtle pride that says, "My approach is better."...

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Introduction

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We live in a culture that encourages judgment. Social media platforms are designed for quick opinions and hot takes. News outlets invite us to form immediate judgments on complex situations we know little about. Even our entertainment often revolves around judging others—from

reality TV competitions to comment sections filled with harsh criticisms.

But this evening, I want us to consider what God's Word has to say about this very human tendency to judge others, and how releasing judgment can lead us to experience a depth of joy in Christ that many of us have never known.

Turn with me to Matthew chapter 7, where Jesus gives us these powerful words beginning in verse 1:

"Don't judge, so that you won't be judged. For with whatever judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but don't consider the beam that is in your own eye? Or how will you tell your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye;' and behold, the beam is in your own eye? You hypocrite! First remove the beam out of your own eye, and then you can see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye."
(Matthew 7:1-5 WEBUS)

These are challenging words from our Savior—words that go against our natural inclinations, against our culture, and against our pride. Today, we're going to explore how breaking free from judgment opens the door to a joy-filled life in Christ.

I believe this message is timely for the body of believers, particularly as we navigate a world filled with division and quick judgments. My prayer is that by the end of our time together, each of us will have a practical path forward to

release judgment and embrace the fullness of joy Jesus promises.

I. The Problem of Judgment (Matthew 7:1-5)

At the heart of Jesus's teaching in Matthew 7 is a profound truth: judgment is rooted in pride. When we judge others, what we're really saying is, "My way is better than your way." We elevate our perspective, our understanding, our approach above someone else's.

Jesus uses this striking image of a speck and a log. Picture it with me: someone with a massive wooden beam protruding from their eye, leaning in close to remove a tiny splinter from someone else's eye. The absurdity of the image would have made Jesus's listeners chuckle, but the humor quickly gives way to conviction. Jesus is using this vivid picture to illustrate our selective vision when it comes to faults—we tend to minimize our own and magnify others'.

Let's look deeper at what Jesus is saying. He's not suggesting we abandon all discernment or moral clarity. Later in this same chapter, Jesus tells us to "beware of false prophets" (v.15) and to recognize people "by their fruits" (v.16). So clearly, Jesus isn't advocating for a worldview where we make no evaluations. What He's addressing is our heart posture—the critical, condemning spirit that positions us as superior to others.

The Universal Tendency to Self-Justify

This mirrors what we read in Proverbs 16, which tells us:

"All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes; but Yahweh weighs the motives. Commit your deeds to Yahweh, and your plans shall succeed. Yahweh has made everything for its own end; yes, even the wicked for the day of evil. Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to Yahweh: they shall certainly not be unpunished." (Proverbs 16:2-5 WEBUS)

Solomon captures a universal human tendency here: self-justification. Everyone thinks they are right—it's our default setting. We all have this tendency to justify our own actions while critically examining others'. The parent who yells at their children justifies it as "necessary discipline," while judging another parent who raises their voice as "lacking self-control." The person who cuts corners at work sees it as "being efficient," while judging a colleague who does the same as "dishonest."

But God sees through all of that. He examines our motives—the why behind our judgments. Are we genuinely concerned for someone's welfare? Or are we simply elevating ourselves by putting others down?

The Disgust of Pride

Pride disgusts God. That's a strong statement, but Scripture doesn't mince words: Proverbs 16:5 says pride is an "abomination" to the Lord. When we position ourselves as the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong in someone else's life,

we're trying to sit in God's seat. We're attempting to claim His role as judge.

C.S. Lewis, in "Mere Christianity," wrote: "Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man... It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest." This comparison is at the heart of judgmental attitudes—we feel better about ourselves when we can point out others' flaws.

Think about what Jesus is saying in Matthew 7. The issue isn't just that we're blind to our own faults. It's that judgment itself becomes a standard by which we ourselves will be measured. "For with whatever judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you."

Do you want mercy? Then show mercy. Do you want grace? Then extend grace. The standard you apply to others is the standard God will apply to you. This echoes Jesus's teaching in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12 WEBUS). And James reinforces this: "For judgment is without mercy to him who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment." (James 2:13 WEBUS).

The Three Drivers of Judgment

This leads us to ask: Why do we feel this overwhelming need to judge in the first place?

I believe it comes down to three main drivers:

First, we judge because it gives us a false sense of security. When we can categorize others as "worse" than us, we feel safer, more secure in our standing. We create a mental hierarchy where we're positioned above others. This false security allows us to avoid confronting our own weaknesses and failures.

Second, we judge because it creates an illusion of control. If I can evaluate, categorize, and determine the worth of others' actions, I convince myself I have some control over my world. In a universe that often feels chaotic and unpredictable, judgment gives us the sensation of having a handle on things. It's a way of organizing our world, even if that organization is artificial.

Third, we judge because it requires no vulnerability on our part. It's far easier to point out others' flaws than to examine our own. Judgment keeps us safely on the offensive, never having to play defense. As long as I'm focused on your issues, I don't have to confront mine. I can hide behind my critical assessments of you, keeping my own struggles safely in the shadows.

But here's the uncomfortable truth: judgment doesn't actually deliver on any of these promises. It doesn't make us more secure—it isolates us. It doesn't give us control—it blinds us to reality. And it doesn't protect us—it prevents authentic connection with others and with God.

The Harmful Effects of Judgment

Judgment also damages our relationships. Think about it: how open are you with people you know are judging you? How vulnerable? How authentic? When we judge others, we create barriers to genuine connection. We position ourselves as superior, creating a relational dynamic that precludes the mutual vulnerability necessary for true intimacy.

And perhaps most significantly, judgment damages our relationship with God. Jesus makes this clear in Matthew 7. When we set ourselves up as judges, we're attempting to usurp God's role. We're saying, in effect, "I know better than You who deserves grace and who deserves condemnation." This posture of pride separates us from the very One who offers us unconditional love and acceptance.

The Way Forward

So what's the alternative to judgment? Jesus gives us the answer in Matthew 7:5: "You hypocrite! First remove the beam out of your own eye, and then you can see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye."

The way forward begins with self-examination. It starts with turning our critical gaze inward before we turn it outward. It requires the humility to acknowledge that we, too, are broken, flawed, and in need of grace.

This doesn't mean we never address issues in others' lives. Jesus doesn't say, "Ignore the speck in your brother's eye."

He says, "First remove the beam out of your own eye, and then you can see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye." The goal is clear vision—seeing others and ourselves as we truly are, not as our pride distorts us to be.

And clear vision always begins with humility. It starts with the recognition that we are not the standard by which others should be measured. God's perfect holiness is the standard, and by that measure, we all fall short. As Romans 3:23 reminds us, "for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God" (WEBUS).

This leads us to our next point: how judgment creates a prison of self-reliance.

II. The Prison of Self-Reliance

Judgment, at its core, is about control. We want to control how others act, what they believe, the choices they make. We want to control our environment, our circumstances, our reputation. And we mistakenly believe that our judgments help us maintain that control.

But this need for control creates a prison of self-reliance—a cage of our own making where we're constantly straining against the bars, exhausting ourselves trying to make everything turn out according to our plans.

The Exhaustion of Control

Think about the most controlling people you know. Are they the most joyful? The most peaceful? The most loving? Rarely. Control and judgment usually produce anxiety, frustration, and isolation.

Control demands constant vigilance. It requires us to monitor, manage, and manipulate our circumstances and relationships to ensure they conform to our expectations. This vigilance is exhausting. It drains our emotional energy, leaving little room for joy, peace, or love.

Control also sets us up for disappointment. Because the truth is, we control far less than we think we do. We can't control others' choices. We can't control unexpected circumstances. We can't control the future. When we build our sense of security on the illusion of control, we're building on sand. And when the inevitable storms come—when people make choices we disagree with, when circumstances don't go as planned, when the future brings unexpected challenges—our sense of security collapses.

Paul's Journey from Self-Righteousness to Surrender

The Apostle Paul understood this struggle intimately. Before encountering Christ, he was Saul of Tarsus—a Pharisee among Pharisees, a man whose identity was built on religious performance and judging others according to the law. But after meeting Jesus, everything changed for him.

In Philippians 3, he wrote:

"Yes most certainly, and I count all things to be a loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and count them nothing but refuse, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, that which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith" (Philippians 3:8-9 WEBUS)

Paul is saying something revolutionary here: "I've given up trying to establish my own righteousness." He had an impressive religious resume—if anyone could have claimed to be righteous based on their own efforts, it was Paul. Yet he calls it all "refuse" compared to knowing Christ.

The word translated as "refuse" here is actually stronger in the original Greek. It's "skubala"—a term that refers to waste or refuse, even excrement. Paul is saying that all his religious achievements, all his moral superiority, all his efforts at self-righteousness are like garbage compared to the gift of knowing Christ.

The Self-Righteousness Trap

Here's where so many of us get stuck: We try to work out our own righteousness. We try to be good enough, holy enough, disciplined enough. And when we inevitably fall short, we either condemn ourselves or—to make ourselves feel better—judge others whose failures are more visible than our own.

It's like we're all taking part in a cosmic game of comparison, desperately trying to make sure we're not at the bottom of the spiritual pile. But Paul shows us a better way—abandoning the game altogether for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.

This self-righteousness trap manifests in two common ways with many believers:

First, there's the overt judgmentalism of those who proudly wear their moral performance as a badge of honor. These are the modern-day Pharisees who look down on those who don't measure up to their standards. They have clear categories of "us" and "them," with "us" always being morally superior.

But there's a second, more subtle form of self-righteousness: the pride of those who pride themselves on not being judgmental. Yes, it's possible to be prideful about our lack of pride, to be judgmental about others' judgmentalism. We can find ourselves thinking, "I'm so glad I'm not like those judgmental people," without realizing we've just made the same judgment we're critiquing.

Both forms of self-righteousness place us in the prison of self-reliance, where we depend on our own moral performance—whether that's following religious rules or being more "accepting" than others—rather than depending on Christ.

The Way of Humility

Paul continues in Philippians 3:

"Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect; but I press on, that I may take hold of that for which also I was taken hold of by Christ Jesus. Brothers, I don't regard myself as yet having taken hold, but one thing I do: forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."
(Philippians 3:12-14 WEBUS)

Notice Paul's humility. He acknowledges he hasn't arrived. He's not perfect. But instead of beating himself up or judging others, he does two things: he forgets what lies behind, and he reaches forward to what lies ahead.

This is critical for breaking free from judgment. We have to let go of our past—both our failures and our successes—and press on toward Christ. Our identity can't be wrapped up in what we've done or failed to do; it must be rooted in who Jesus says we are.

The Enemy's Strategy

Satan loves to fuel your pride. He uses your pride and his lies to justify your judging. He then blocks you from allowing God to show you the truth. God wants you to see the good in someone or, at least, the benefit of the situation or conflict you are experiencing. But God can't reveal what He wants you to see when you're full of yourself.

The enemy understands that pride is the gateway to all kinds of sin. That's why pride was the first sin—Lucifer's desire to exalt himself above God. And it's why pride remains the enemy's primary tool for keeping us trapped in cycles of judgment and self-righteousness.

When we're filled with pride, we leave no room for God's perspective. We become so convinced of our own rightness that we can't hear His voice or see His work in situations and people that don't fit our expectations.

Jesus's Example: The Woman Caught in Adultery

In John 8, we find the story of the woman caught in adultery. The religious leaders bring her before Jesus, ready to stone her according to the law. Their judgment of her was technically correct—the law did prescribe death for adultery. But Jesus challenges them: "He who is without sin among you, let him throw the first stone at her." (John 8:7 WEBUS).

One by one, they walk away, convicted by their own conscience. Jesus then asks the woman, "Where are your accusers? Did no one condemn you?" She answers, "No one, Lord." And Jesus says, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way. From now on, sin no more." (John 8:10-11 WEBUS).

This is the gospel in action. Jesus doesn't ignore sin—he acknowledges it and calls for change. But he does so without the condemning judgment that the religious leaders brought. And notice that the accusers' judgment hadn't helped the

woman change; it was Jesus's compassion coupled with truth that set her on a new path.

The Illusion of Control

When we try to control everything, when we build our identity on anything other than Christ—our accomplishments, our reputation, our righteousness—we're trapped in a prison of self-reliance. And ironically, this prison doesn't just keep joy out; it keeps judgment in.

Our obsession with control extends beyond just judging others. We try to control our circumstances too. We think if we can just make everything go according to plan, we'll find peace. But life rarely cooperates with our plans, does it?

I'm reminded of Proverbs 19:21: "There are many plans in a man's heart, but Yahweh's counsel will prevail." (WEBUS). Or James 4:13-15: "Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow let's go into this city, and spend a year there, trade, and make a profit." Whereas you don't know what your life will be like tomorrow. For what is your life? For you are a vapor that appears for a little time, and then vanishes away. For you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will both live, and do this or that." (WEBUS).

The illusion of control is just that—an illusion. And the sooner we surrender it, the sooner we find freedom.

This leads us to our next point: how do we practically release control and judgment in our daily lives?

III. The Practice of Releasing Control

So how do we break free? How do we release judgment and find the joy Christ promises?

It starts with a simple but profound shift: Let God be God. Let Him handle the judging.

Jesus makes this clear in His teaching. He doesn't say there's no such thing as right and wrong or that discernment is unnecessary. But He places the ultimate responsibility for judgment where it belongs—with God.

The Biblical Case for Letting God Judge

Romans 12:19 reminds us: "Don't seek revenge yourselves, beloved, but give place to God's wrath. For it is written, 'Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay, says the Lord.'" (WEBUS).

And in 1 Corinthians 4:5, Paul writes: "Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each man will get his praise from God." (WEBUS).

These passages make it clear: judgment belongs to God. He is the only one who sees the full picture. He is the only one who knows the hearts and motives of others. He is the only one with the wisdom, love, and justice to judge rightly.

When you leave it up to God to handle people, it frees up your time, energy, and often money that are all wasted when you try to play a divine role that is not yours to play. When you are disciplined enough to not get bent out of shape over what other people do, you will reflect God's heart. You'll feel better. You'll be better.

Seven Practices for Releasing Control and Judgment

But how do we practically apply this? How do we move from the abstract idea of "letting God be God" to concrete changes in our thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors? Let me offer seven specific practices that can help us release control and judgment:

1. Choose Love and Grace

First, choose love and grace over judgment and anger. 1 Peter 4:8 tells us, "And above all things be earnest in your love among yourselves, for love covers a multitude of sins." (WEBUS). Love always wins, and grace does not allow you to box people into your judgmental view of them. It opens the door for them to be what God has called them to be instead of condemning them with your self-righteous anger.

This doesn't mean we ignore harmful behavior or pretend sin doesn't exist. But it means we approach others with the same grace we've received from God. As Ephesians 4:32 instructs: "And be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving each other, just as God also in Christ forgave you." (WEBUS).

Love and grace create space for growth and transformation. When we judge others, we essentially freeze them in their current state—we define them by their failures or shortcomings. But when we love and extend grace, we create room for them to become who God is calling them to be.

Think about how Jesus dealt with those society had written off: the woman at the well, Zacchaeus, Matthew the tax collector. He didn't define them by their past or their sin. He saw their potential and called it forth. And because He related to them with love and grace rather than judgment, they were transformed.

Choosing a lifestyle of love and grace also opens up the door for you to be what God has called you to be. You can't fully step into your calling while carrying the weight of judgment toward others.

I once knew a man who had been hurt deeply by church leaders. For years, he carried resentment and judgment toward them, analyzing their every action through the lens of his past experience. But his judgment didn't hurt them—it hurt him. It kept him from fully engaging in a new church community. It robbed him of joy. It consumed his mental energy.

When he finally chose to release that judgment and extend grace—not because they deserved it, but because he needed freedom—everything changed for him. His focus shifted from

their failures to God's faithfulness. His spiritual life flourished. His joy returned. That man was me.

What would it look like for you to choose love and grace over judgment today? Is there someone in your life you've been defining by their worst moments? Could you begin to see them as God sees them—as a beloved child with immense potential and worth?

2. Practice Radical Forgiveness

Second, practice forgiveness—receive it and give it. When you abide in God's forgiveness for all of your sins, it makes it extremely difficult to not freely forgive others for their sins. When you accept what God has freely given, it makes it extremely difficult to not freely give to others.

Think about this: If Jesus could forgive you for driving the nails into His hands and feet, you can forgive someone else for whatever they need to be forgiven for, especially when they don't ask for forgiveness.

Colossians 3:13 reminds us to "bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, if any man has a complaint against any; even as Christ forgave you, so you also do." (WEBUS).

And do not belittle the sacrifice of Jesus by not both confessing your sins and receiving the forgiveness He gave His life for. You are not meant to remain in a state of condemnation when you either slip up or significantly backslide. Romans 8:1 assures us, "There is therefore now no

condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who don't walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit." (WEBUS).

Forgiveness is not saying what happened was okay. It's not forgetting or pretending you weren't hurt. It's not even necessarily reconciliation, which takes both parties.

Forgiveness is a one-sided decision to release someone from the debt they owe you—to stop demanding payment for the wrong they've done.

Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. It hurts us far more than it hurts those who have wronged us. It binds us to the past, preventing us from moving forward into the future God has for us.

Corrie ten Boom, who survived the Nazi concentration camps, once said, "Forgiveness is setting the prisoner free, only to discover that the prisoner was you." When we choose to forgive, we're not doing the other person a favor—we're setting ourselves free from the prison of bitterness and resentment.

And here's a profound truth: forgiveness is not a one-time event but an ongoing process. Sometimes we have to forgive the same offense multiple times as memories resurface and emotions are triggered. But each time we choose forgiveness, we take another step toward freedom.

Is there someone you need to forgive today? Is there a past hurt you've been holding onto, using as a reason to judge or

condemn? What would it look like to release that debt and set yourself free?

3. Cultivate Gratitude

Third, cultivate gratitude. Gratitude destroys anger every time. When you shift your focus to all of the things you are grateful to God for, anything you are angry about vaporizes. You cannot be truly grateful and angry at the same time.

1 Thessalonians 5:18 instructs us to "In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus toward you." (WEBUS). Notice it doesn't say to give thanks FOR all circumstances, but IN all circumstances. There's a profound difference.

When we practice gratitude, we're acknowledging God's sovereignty over our lives. We're recognizing that even in difficult situations, He is working for our good. We're shifting our focus from what's wrong to what's right.

Gratitude is a powerful antidote to judgment because it shifts our focus from what others are doing wrong to what God is doing right. It's hard to judge someone else when you're busy counting your own blessings.

Gratitude also cultivates humility. When we recognize that everything we have is a gift from God—not something we've earned or deserve—it becomes harder to judge others for what they lack. We realize that the only difference between us and them is God's grace.

A practical way to cultivate gratitude is to start and end each day by naming specific things you're thankful for. Not vague generalities like "my family" or "my job," but specific moments of grace you've experienced: the encouraging text from a friend, the beautiful sunset on your drive home, the strength to complete a difficult task, the patience shown to you when you made a mistake.

Research has shown that people who practice gratitude experience more positive emotions, sleep better, express more compassion and kindness, and even have stronger immune systems. Gratitude doesn't just destroy anger and judgment—it enhances our overall well-being.

What are you grateful for today? Can you name three specific blessings you've experienced in the last 24 hours? How might focusing on these gifts change your perspective on the people and situations you've been judging?

4. Guard Your Speech

Fourth, resist the temptation to give your unsolicited opinion. Proverbs 10:19 warns, "In the multitude of words there is no lack of disobedience, but he who restrains his lips does wisely." (WEBUS). And Proverbs 17:28 humorously adds, "Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is counted wise. When he shuts his lips, he is thought to be discerning." (WEBUS).

Be aware that people want to hear your opinion far less often than the times you have a desire to share it. Keep your mouth

shut. It is a win-win formula. You will be happier and the people you interact with will be too.

James 1:19 gives us this wisdom: "So, then, my beloved brothers, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger" (WEBUS). What if we reversed the ratio of our listening to our speaking? What if we listened twice as much as we talked?

Our words reveal our judgments. When we're quick to offer our opinion, to criticize, or to correct, we're often expressing a judgmental heart. But when we listen—truly listen with the intent to understand rather than to respond—we create space for empathy and connection.

This doesn't mean we never speak truth into others' lives. But it does mean we earn the right to be heard through relationship and invitation. And when we do speak, we do so with humility, recognizing that we don't have all the answers.

If you think you can understand someone's personal history, motives, and mindset, think again. You're not that smart. God understands. It's not your job to understand. In most cases of personal interaction, it's wrong to position as if you are right. It's not even about what is right and what is wrong. It's about the fact that it typically has nothing to do with you. When you release the need to be right, you release the habit of being wrong.

One practical way to guard your speech is to ask yourself three questions before you speak: Is it true? Is it necessary?

Is it kind? If what you're about to say doesn't meet all three criteria, it might be better left unsaid.

Another practice is to count to ten before responding in a potentially contentious conversation. This brief pause gives you time to consider whether your response is coming from love or from judgment.

How much of what you say in a typical day is truly necessary?
How often do you offer unsolicited opinions or criticisms?
What would it look like to practice restraint in your speech for just one day?

5. Create Safe Spaces

Fifth, recognize that healthy relationships grow when judgment is not permitted. When someone knows that you won't judge them, they are more likely to open up to you. When you love them like Jesus loves them, it creates a safe place for authenticity and trust.

If you are a Christian, be like Christ and bring unconditional love to others. It's rare but desired by everyone. I've found that people are drawn to those who make them feel safe—not those who make them feel judged.

Think about Jesus's approach. The religious people of His day were shocked at how He associated with "sinners." But those sinners flocked to Him. Why? Because in His presence, they felt valued, not condemned. They sensed His love was genuine, not conditional on their behavior.

Creating safe spaces doesn't mean we approve of everything someone does. It means we separate the person from their behavior, valuing them as image-bearers of God even when we disagree with their choices. It means we extend the same grace to them that God has extended to us.

Safe spaces are marked by several characteristics:

- Active listening without interruption or immediate advice-giving
- Empathy that seeks to understand feelings, not just facts
- Confidentiality that respects privacy and builds trust
- Acceptance that communicates, "You matter to me," regardless of agreement
- Patience that allows others to process at their own pace
- Humility that acknowledges, "I don't have all the answers"

These characteristics create an environment where people feel free to be vulnerable, authentic, and honest—both with themselves and with others. And it's in this kind of environment that growth and transformation happen.

God loves everyone and His desire is to draw them closer to Himself. He is much better at this than you but He does call you to play a role. He calls you to love them unconditionally. Unconditional love means you meet people where they are and let God do what He is already doing.

Who in your life needs a safe space right now? How could you create that space for them? What judgments might you need to release to truly accept them where they are?

6. Practice Empowering Questions

Sixth, instead of trying to convince someone to do something, ask questions that lead them to want to do something. Self-motivation is better than outside motivation.

Ask empowering questions like, "What's the problem and does it need to be fixed now?" "Why is it important now?" "Have you tried to fix this in the past?" "How long has that been going on?" "If there was a way to solve that easily, what do you think that would look like?" "Would you be open to getting some help with that?"

This approach respects others' autonomy and intelligence. It assumes they are capable of finding solutions rather than positioning yourself as the expert with all the answers. It creates buy-in and ownership that external pressure never could.

Remember, Jesus often asked questions even when He knew the answers. "Who do people say that I am?" "Do you want to get well?" "What do you want me to do for you?" These questions invited engagement and self-reflection.

When we ask questions instead of making statements, we shift from a posture of judgment to one of curiosity. Curiosity leaves room for discovery, growth, and revelation. It

acknowledges that we don't have all the answers and that God might be working in ways we haven't considered.

Questions also honor the image of God in others by respecting their agency and capacity for discernment. Rather than treating them as projects to be fixed or problems to be solved, we treat them as partners in a journey of growth and discovery.

In my years of ministry, I've found that people rarely change because someone told them to. They change when they come to their own conclusions about what needs to change and why. Our role is not to force that conclusion but to create space for the Holy Spirit to work and to ask questions that facilitate reflection and insight.

What relationships in your life might benefit from more questions and fewer statements? How might your conversations change if you approached them with curiosity rather than certainty?

7. Surrender Your Identity

Finally, release control of your own identity. This is often very difficult. Identity is everything and it controls everything you do. How you view you determines what you do. Your identity should be wrapped up in God's view of you through the filter of your Savior Jesus Christ. Anything apart from His view exposes your self-image which is always rooted in fear.

Fear is nothing less and nothing more than the concern that you have something to lose. When you have nothing to lose, you have nothing to fear. When you have nothing to fear, anything can happen and practically everything is possible.

2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us, "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old things have passed away. Behold, all things have become new." (WEBUS). And Galatians 2:20 adds, "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me. That life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me." (WEBUS).

Unconscious competency of your identity in Christ ensures tangible spiritual progress instead of just movement on the religious treadmill.

This surrender of identity is perhaps the most challenging—and most transformative—aspect of releasing judgment and control. It requires us to let go of how we define ourselves: our accomplishments, our failures, our roles, our reputation, our possessions. Instead, we embrace our identity as beloved children of God, adopted into His family through Christ.

When our identity is secure in Christ, we no longer need to judge others to feel better about ourselves. We no longer need to control circumstances to protect our sense of self. We're free to love without condition, to serve without expectation, to give without reservation.

This doesn't happen overnight. It's a process of daily surrender, of continually laying down our false identities and embracing our true identity in Christ. It's a journey of discovering who we really are by discovering whose we really are.

You can't feel shame and trust in God simultaneously. When you feel like you are not good enough, feel guilty over something you did, or are embarrassed by some failure, it's all about you. God is not waiting for YOU to do something so the shame can be removed. Only HE can remove it when you surrender and let Him do it.

You also can't willfully sin and trust in God simultaneously. When you are tempted to sin, God is faithful and you can trust Him to help you. Just ask Him. He will never forsake you. He is always there. Trust Him to bring you through and He always will.

Henri Nouwen, in his book "Life of the Beloved," writes about identity this way: "We are not what we do, we are not what we have, we are not what others think of us. Coming home is claiming the truth. I am the beloved child of a loving creator."

What false identities have you been clinging to? How might surrendering those identities to Christ free you from the need to judge others or control your circumstances?

The Freedom That Follows

As you practice these seven principles—choosing love and grace, practicing forgiveness, cultivating gratitude, guarding your speech, creating safe spaces, asking empowering questions, and surrendering your identity—something amazing happens: peace floods in where judgment once resided. The mental and emotional energy you spent judging others is now available for joy.

Let me emphasize: This is not a one-time decision but a daily practice. We don't break free from judgment overnight. It's a moment-by-moment choice, a continual surrender. And sometimes, we'll fail. When that happens, we return to grace—both receiving it from God and extending it to ourselves.

Remember, Jesus also warned us in Matthew 7:6: "Don't give that which is holy to the dogs, neither throw your pearls before the pigs, lest perhaps they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces." (WEBUS).

This isn't a contradiction of His teaching on judgment; it's a reminder of wisdom. Not everyone wants your help or your input. When we try to "fix" people who haven't asked for our help, we often create conflict rather than growth. Discernment is still necessary—we just need to make sure it's coming from a place of love, not judgment.

IV. The Promise of Complete Joy

Jesus makes an incredible invitation in Matthew 11:28-30:

"Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (WEBUS).

This is the promise for those who release judgment and control: rest for your soul. Peace that transcends understanding. Complete joy.

The World's Counterfeit Rest

The world offers us a counterfeit version of rest. It says, "Once you have everything under control, then you'll find peace." But that's a lie. Control is an illusion, and chasing it leads to exhaustion, not rest.

Our culture promotes a vision of the "good life" that's built on achievement, acquisition, and appearance. If you just work hard enough, accumulate enough, look good enough, then you'll find happiness. But those who reach these goals often discover they're still empty inside. The goalposts keep moving, and the peace they seek remains elusive.

Jesus offers a radically different perspective. He says, "Come to me... and I will give you rest." Not "Come to me after you've fixed everything" or "Come to me once you're good enough." Just "Come to me"—as you are, with all your burdens, failures, and struggles.

The Paradox of Surrender

Jesus offers a paradoxical truth: it's in surrendering control that we find rest. It's in releasing our grip that we experience peace. It's in dying to ourselves that we find life.

John 15:9-11 captures Jesus's promise of joy:

"Even as the Father has loved me, I also have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and remain in his love. I have spoken these things to you, that my joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be made full." (WEBUS).

Notice the connection between abiding in Christ's love and experiencing complete joy. This isn't coincidental. Joy isn't found in controlling our circumstances or judging others; it's found in abiding in the love of Jesus.

And what does it mean to abide in His love? Jesus tells us: "If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love." Obedience isn't oppressive; it's the pathway to freedom and joy. When we align our lives with God's design, we experience the fullness of life He intended for us.

The Promises of Abiding

When we love Jesus, remain in Him, and allow Him to remain in us, He promises:

- We will obey His commands
- The Father will love us
- Jesus will reveal Himself to us

- The Father and He will come to us and live with us
- We will have rest for our souls
- We will bear much fruit
- We will bring glory to the Father
- We will prove to be His disciples
- Our joy will be complete
- He will do whatever we ask
- We will know Him and the Father and experience eternal life

These promises are staggering in their scope and significance. They address our deepest longings: to be loved, to have purpose, to find rest, to experience joy, to know and be known. And they're all found in relationship with Jesus.

The Paradox of Priorities

If this is all true—and it is—why in the world would anyone be consumed with things of this earth? Why would you hang on to a life in this world that is wrecked and broken?

The answer is in our inability to fully trust God. We think we have too much to lose to give up everything to Jesus. We trust that we can hold back and Jesus is going to have our back because that's what Jesus does. Although Jesus paid the price for your life, He doesn't sugarcoat the fact that He commands that you give up your life so you can gain the life He paid for.

Matthew 16:25 records Jesus saying, "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, and whoever will lose his life for my

sake will find it." (WEBUS). This is the great paradox of the Christian faith—in surrender, we find victory. In giving up control, we gain freedom. In dying to self, we find life.

Time is a gift. Ephesians 5:16 instructs us to "redeeming the time, because the days are evil." (WEBUS). How much of that precious gift do we waste on judgment, control, and worry?

God's Guidelines, Not Punishment

God did not give us rules to follow in order to punish us. He knows what's best for the humans He created. Because He loves us and wants us to do well, He gave us guidelines to stay within. When we choose to love Him back and stay within those guidelines, we are choosing to stay within His will and there are huge benefits when we do.

Think of it this way: when a parent tells a child not to touch a hot stove, it's not to restrict the child's freedom but to protect them from harm. God's commandments serve the same purpose—they're not arbitrary restrictions but loving protections. They define the boundaries within which we can flourish.

The biggest benefit is that Jesus promises to reveal Himself to us. In John 14:21, He says, "One who has my commandments and keeps them, that person is one who loves me. One who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him, and will reveal myself to him." (WEBUS). He also promises that He and the Father will come and live with us. Just a few verses later in John 14:23: "If a man loves me,

he will keep my word. My Father will love him, and we will come to him, and make our home with him." (WEBUS).

Wow, what a cool promise! Don't miss the fact that there is a clear "if" you do this, "then" We will do this. The payoff for surrendering to God's will and following His commands is the greatest opportunity you will ever have. Nothing in this world can compare to what God desires for you both here on earth and eternally in heaven.

The Reality of Consequences

When we choose to step outside of the GODlines, there are significant consequences. If you are bold enough to think that you are smarter than the God of the Universe, go ahead and try stepping outside of His will for your life. However, don't be surprised when challenges emerge from those decisions.

This isn't God punishing us; it's the natural result of living contrary to our design. When we ignore the manufacturer's instructions for a device, we shouldn't be surprised when it malfunctions. Similarly, when we ignore God's instructions for human flourishing, we shouldn't be surprised when our lives don't work as intended.

If you want true peace, gladly accept His guidance. This does not mean everything will "go well" on earth. We exist in a fallen world. Fortunately, we are assured by God that it will all "end well" eternally for those who know God and know Jesus whom He sent.

Letting Go of the Past

Do you ever feel like you are between a rock and a hard place? Most of the things that we think are important, are not important at all. This includes many events or circumstances in our past. It doesn't matter if something happened 20 years ago or 20 minutes ago.

In fact, recency bias is the human tendency to give recent events more credence than events that happened further in the past. It's ALL in the past. Pull the lessons necessary and move forward...the faster the better. Jesus isn't on the throne dazed and confused about your situation. He paid the price so you don't have to continue paying the price. Receive God's grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love and then pay it forward to others. Today is a good day to do that. Don't delay joy!

Our past can become a prison that keeps us trapped in cycles of shame, regret, and self-judgment. Or it can become a classroom where we learn valuable lessons and grow in wisdom and grace. The difference lies in how we relate to our past—whether we're defined by it or learn from it.

Paul models this approach in Philippians 3:13-14: "Brothers, I don't regard myself as yet having taken hold, but one thing I do: forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." (WEBUS). Paul had plenty he could have dwelled on—his

persecution of the church, his failures, his sufferings. But he chose to focus forward, and so can we.

The End of Self, The Beginning of Freedom

The end of self is the beginning of true freedom. As humans, we are so preoccupied with getting our needs met that letting go of ourselves and giving up our life does not compute. We fight against it naturally and often violently. The enemy of our soul has one goal—keep us enslaved.

Our culture worships at the altar of self. "Follow your heart." "You do you." "Live your truth." These mantras sound liberating, but they often lead to a self-centered existence that's ultimately empty.

It takes a true act of God to be "free from me" and become "alive in Him." Until that occurs and we unconditionally surrender, we remain in slavery. True, authentic, and complete trust in God is so rare because we think somehow that we can do it on our own. We cannot. There is no way that we can work up the strength to reach that decision. However, God can do it. He wants to do it.

The question is: Are you willing to let Him? Are you willing to admit how desperate you are for Him to come in and take over? Are you willing to forsake everything else for the only One you'll ever need?

The Prayer of Surrender

It can happen slowly over decades but that's going to be a very painful experience. Instead, you can throw your hands up and say with everything inside of you:

"Father, forgive me for holding on so tight to the parts of me I've not trusted You with. It's scary to give up and release it all to You. I know You love me and I know that I won't ever regret getting out of Your way. I know that continuing to try and make things happen my way will not end well. So Lord, HELP! Take my life. I don't want any part of it if you're not in it. Help me release EVERYTHING from my past that needs to be released. Take away all the guilt and shame from both the sins that I've committed and what's been done to me. I know Jesus lived the perfect life, suffered a horrible death, and was resurrected so that I can be saved from myself. I am letting go. I am pleading with you to make me 'free from me', renewed in Your Spirit, and transformed to bear good fruit for the rest of my life. I surrender all. I praise You my Lord and my God. In Jesus Name, Amen."

This prayer of surrender is not a one-time fix but a daily posture. It's a moment-by-moment choice to release control and judgment, to die to self and live in Christ.

If you say that from your heart and throw yourself daily into deeply accessing the true knowledge of Jesus Christ, Jesus will rush in. You can count on Him. Expect it. Believe it.

The Path Forward: 2 Peter 1:3-11

Meditate on 2 Peter 1:3-11, which provides a simple but powerful formula for experiencing freedom from the flesh, the world, and the enemy:

"seeing that his divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and virtue, by which he has granted to us his precious and exceedingly great promises; that through these you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world by lust. Yes, and for this very cause adding on your part all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence; and in moral excellence, knowledge; and in knowledge, self-control; and in self-control, perseverance; and in perseverance, godliness; and in godliness, brotherly affection; and in brotherly affection, love. For if these things are yours and abound, they make you to not be idle or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is blind, seeing only what is near, having forgotten the cleansing from his old sins. Therefore, brothers, be more diligent to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never stumble. For thus you will be richly supplied with the entrance into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ." (WEBUS).

This passage shows us that through God's power, we've been given everything we need for life and godliness. We don't need to strive and control and judge. We've already been equipped. And when we build upon our faith with these

qualities—moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love—we become effective and productive in our knowledge of Christ.

Notice that love is the culmination of this progression. When we judge others, we short-circuit this entire process. We cannot grow in love while harboring judgment.

Be intentional EVERY day. Make rest a priority and wake up early to set your mind on Jesus long before the world enters in to grab your attention. You will have a walk of discovery unlike anything you've ever experienced, and this will be an ongoing reality as long as you remain humble and desperate for Jesus. Apart from Him, you can do nothing, so never try. Stay surrendered. Trust in Him.

As your relationship with Him continues to grow deeper and deeper, you will become stronger and stronger in His purpose. He will reveal things to you, and your life will have meaning and purpose beyond anything you can imagine.

This isn't just theory or theological concepts—this is real life transformation that God wants for each of us.

Word of Caution

"You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people; but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am Yahweh." (Leviticus 19:17-18 WEBUS)

While Jesus teaches us not to judge others harshly, Scripture also calls us to lovingly help one another toward repentance. As we've seen in Leviticus 19:17-18, we are to "surely rebuke your neighbor" rather than hate them in our hearts. This is echoed in Galatians 6:1 (WEBUS): "Brothers, even if a man is caught in some fault, you who are spiritual must restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to yourself so that you also aren't tempted." Similarly, James 5:19-20 reminds us: "Brothers, if any among you wanders from the truth and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." This careful correction comes not from a place of superiority or judgment, but from humble love, as 2 Timothy 2:25 instructs: "in gentleness correcting those who oppose him: perhaps God may give them repentance leading to a full knowledge of the truth." The difference is in our heart posture—not condemning others from our pride, but helping restore them from our love, always examining ourselves first.

Conclusion

We started today talking about judgment—how easily we fall into the trap of judging others and trying to control our world. We've seen how Jesus calls us to a different way: to remove the log from our own eye before worrying about the speck in someone else's.

We've unpacked how judgment creates a prison of self-reliance, trapping us in cycles of pride and control. And

we've explored practical ways to release control and experience the joy Christ promises.

Now I invite you to take that final step: surrender.

What if today, you threw your hands up and said with everything inside of you:

"Father, forgive me for holding on so tight to the parts of me I've not trusted You with. It's scary to give up and release it all to You. I know You love me and I know that I won't ever regret getting out of Your way. I know that continuing to try and make things happen my way will not end well. So Lord, HELP! Take my life. I don't want any part of it if you're not in it. Help me release EVERYTHING from my past that needs to be released. Take away all the guilt and shame from both the sins that I've committed and what's been done to me. I know Jesus lived the perfect life, suffered a horrible death, and was resurrected so that I can be saved from myself. I am letting go. I am pleading with you to make me 'free from me', renewed in Your Spirit, and transformed to bear good fruit for the rest of my life. I surrender all. I praise You my Lord and my God. In Jesus Name, Amen."

If you say that from your heart and throw yourself daily into deeply accessing the true knowledge of Jesus Christ, Jesus will rush in. You can count on Him. Expect it. Believe it.

Don't delay joy! The choice is before you today: Will you continue in the prison of judgment and control, or will you step into the freedom and joy Jesus offers?

Let me be clear: this isn't about simply trying harder to be less judgmental. That approach will ultimately fail because it still relies on our own effort and willpower. Instead, this is about a fundamental shift in how we see ourselves, others, and God. It's about surrendering our need to be right, to be in control, to have it all figured out. It's about trading our judgment for His mercy, our control for His sovereignty, our striving for His rest.

Romans 14:4 asks, "Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own lord he stands or falls. Yes, he will be made to stand, for God has power to make him stand." (WEBUS). When we remember that every person we encounter belongs to God—not to us—it changes how we view them. They answer to Him, not to us. And He is able to make them stand, even when we think they'll surely fall.

As we close today, I want to invite you to make a decision—a decision to break free from judgment and step into joy. This may be a decision you need to make for the first time, or it may be a recommitment to a path you've walked before but have strayed from.

Whatever your situation, the invitation is the same: Come to Jesus, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and He will give you rest.

Today, I'm challenging all of us—myself included—to break free from judgment and step into the complete joy Jesus promises. Will you join me on this journey?

[Closing prayer]