



# Signature Sins

Vienna Presbyterian Church  
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Matthew 7:1-5

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What is the most well-known Bible verse? When I was growing up, hands down it was John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” I remember the guy some years ago, who used to position himself at football games in the end-zone sporting a rainbow-colored afro wig in a John 3:16 T-shirt. Today, the most recognizable verse may be the words from our lesson, “Do not judge.”

“Do not judge,” has become America’s 11<sup>th</sup> commandment. Making judgments about anyone or anything is now considered off limits, almost medieval.



Let me take you back to 2013. Pope Francis was recently elevated as the new pontiff in the Roman Catholic Church. He engaged in an impromptu press conference with

reporters at the rear of an airplane. He was asked to comment on the charge that a high-ranking priest in the Vatican was involved in a homosexual scandal. This priest was also linked to a so-called gay lobby that was pressuring the Vatican to relax its standards on gays in the church. Pope Francis said at one point, “If such a person repents of his sin and is forgiven, then who am I to judge?”

Those five little words—who am I to judge—sent the press into a media frenzy. Headlines announced the new pope would alter traditional Catholic theology. When the dust settled, we learned the issues were far more nuanced than the way it was initially reported. Pope Francis had reaffirmed a core Christian teaching, namely that God is the final arbiter and judge of another person’s character.

The press jumped all over the pope's "who-am-I-to-judge?" remark because it touched a vital nerve. People are hesitant anymore to pass judgment on much of anything.

The Greek word for *judge* in the New Testament has two essential meanings. The first meaning is to analyze and evaluate something. The second definition is to condemn and avenge. This second definition is reserved for God alone, while the first meaning is sorely needed in our day.

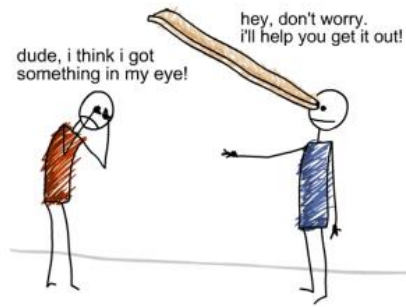


**Judge**  
(Greek: krino)

1. To analyze and evaluate
2. To condemn and avenge

In the last few Sundays that I have been gone from VPC, there has been a suicide bombing at an Istanbul airport that claimed the lives of 42 people. There was a horrific truck massacre in Nice, France that resulted in 84 deaths. Racial tension has escalated in the aftermath of police shootings of several young black men and retaliatory measures that resulted in 10 police dead. On what grounds can we speak up against justice if we shrug our shoulders and say, "Who am I to judge? How else can a private citizen serve on a jury? How else can a teacher evaluate a student's performance? How else can we render judgments about things that really matter?"

It's this second definition of judgment Jesus has in mind when he delivers his famous Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 7, he begins, "Do not judge or you will be judged," which has the effect of "Do not condemn." He follows it in verse 2 with a qualifier about what God will do if we insist on condemning others: "For in the same way you will judge others, you will be judged and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." Then, in verses 3-5, Jesus



employs a metaphor about logs and specks. The figure of speech is ludicrous in the extreme; comical even. Here is a log-eyed reformer with a virtual 2x4 protruding from his eye attempting to save some speck-eyed sinner. It's vintage Jesus.

Jesus follows up this teaching on judgment by cautioning his listeners not to give holy things to dogs or to cast pearls before swine (7:6). To make sense of Jesus' teaching requires us to make sound judgments about who qualifies as dogs and swine in our lesson. Later in the same chapter, Jesus calls them to distinguish true from false prophets (7:15-20) and genuine disciples from mere imposters (7:21-23).

Jesus is not asking his followers to put aside their critical faculties. What he calls into question is making sweeping and definitive declarations about someone else. Wise discernment is needed. Damning criticism is strictly off limits.

The irony is unmistakable. Whenever we judge, we run the risk of becoming a dead-eye critic of other people's flaws while being blind as bats about our own sins. Judgment must begin with us.

Our church is focusing on renewal and revival this year. God desires to renew his people, the church. Lord knows, we need it.

Our sermons this summer have focused on various practices of a disciple that will ignite more passion for God. We have preached on the spiritual practices of prayer,

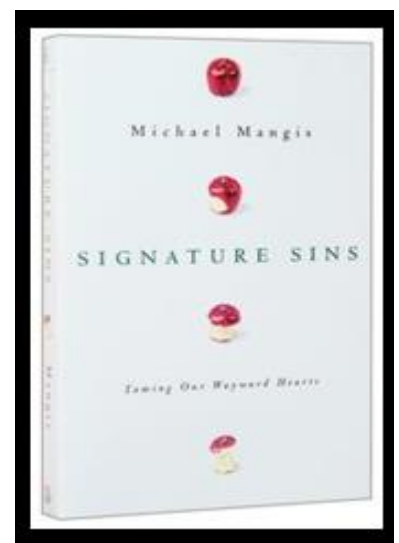
reading Scripture, fasting, solitude and Sabbath-keeping. Confession is today's featured spiritual practice. In every revival movement in history, confession plays a vital role. Whenever people are willing to apologize to each other and contemplate the enormity of their sins, revival breaks out.

Confession is coming to God just as we are. No pretenses, no excuses, no pretending to be better than we are. We are willing to come clean with the only One who can possibly save us.

The author of Hebrews likens the Christian life to running a long-distance race. We are invited to run with perseverance the race set out for us, looking to Jesus as our pacesetter, if you will. The author implores us to "throw off every weight and every sin that clings so closely" (12:1). In the original King James, this verse is translated, "Every sin that so easily besets us." Beset means to surround on all sides with hostile intent. A besetting sin is a recurring temptation to which we are especially prone.

Each of us is susceptible to certain sins based on our personalities and temperaments. There are some sins which cling so closely that we hardly know they are there, much like a second skin.

I'm reading a book titled, *Signature Sins*, on this very topic. Author Michael Mangis asserts that everyone is afflicted with besetting sins, what he calls "signature sins." His intent is to help readers identify their signature or besetting sins so that the Spirit of God can root them out of our lives.

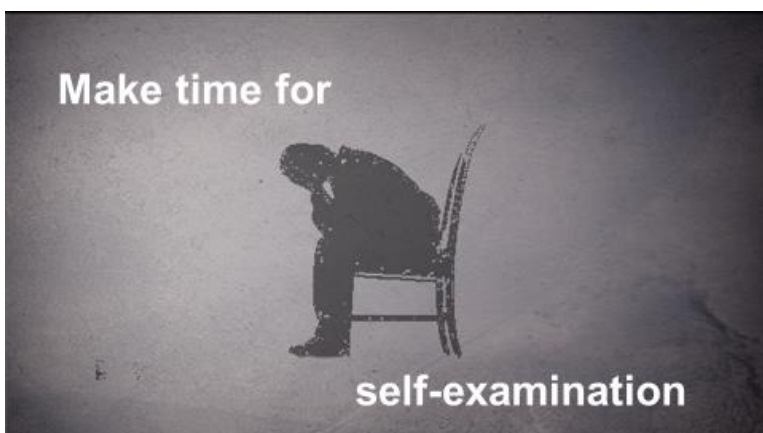


Mangis identifies pride as his chief sin. “The signature sin at the center of my own personal web is pride...I see the ways I try to impress others. I see the ways I seek recognition from others. I see the jokes I make to insert myself into every discussion. I see the ways I try to escape responsibility for my mistakes. I see the internal wheels turning right now, wondering if people will be impressed with my honesty.”

I could have written these words. Pride is a signature sin in my life also. I give inordinate attention to presenting myself in the best possible light so other people will like and admire me. I do not relish telling you this truth about my life. But, as Mangis suggests, naming our signature sins is the first step in a process toward dethroning them.

It’s tempting to compare myself to the guy down the street who drinks too much and loses his temper. As long as I compare myself to other people who, in my opinion, don’t fare as well, I avoid my unique sin pattern. If I keep the focus on other people’s sins, I feel better about my own sins.

Naming our signature sins takes courage and humility. It takes courage to face up to the awful reality of our sins. It takes humility to measure ourselves against God’s Biblical standard rather than some arbitrary measure we set for ourselves.



So what difference does this sermon on judgment and confession make in my life? My suggestion is that you set some time aside in the next few days to engage in self-examination.

Ask God to graciously reveal what is true about yourself.

Some of you will undoubtedly resist this invitation. You may be unsure as to whether you want to delve more deeply into your signature sins. Pay attention to this resistance. Could it be that you secretly enjoy this vice and don't want to part with it since it brings you some measure of pleasure and comfort?

Let's suppose your signature sin is anger. You may not like what anger does to you, but inwardly you still hold onto it. Frederick Buechner writes, "Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll your tongue over the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to save to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."

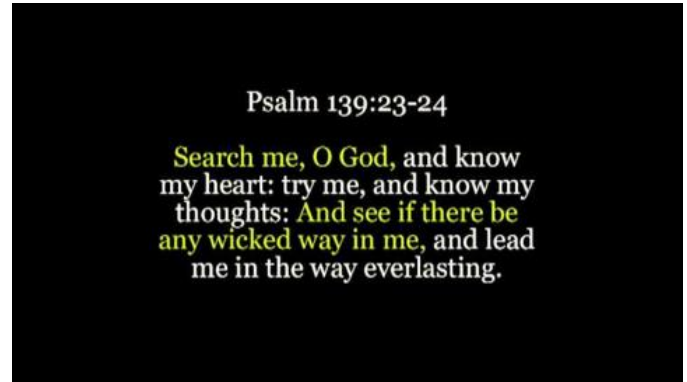
Let's be clear. Self-examination is not an exercise leading to self-loathing and self-condemnation. It's not a ploy to make you feel worse about yourself. I repeat: we name our sins so that the Spirit of God can root them out of our lives.

Dallas Willard observes that the church often practices what he calls "the gospel of sin management." The central message of the gospel for many Christians is that Jesus died for our sins and if only we believe it, we will go to heaven when we die. Our mission in the interim is to keep our sins under control. The transformation of our lives and character receives scant attention. Maybe this explains why people who profess Christ don't differ significantly in behavior from people who don't profess Christ.

I'm asking you to give self-examination a fair shot.

How would you go about doing so? I would urge you to pray the words of Psalm 139, "Search me, God, and

know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See for yourself if I have done anything wrong and then lead me in the way everlasting" (139:23-24).



If you find it hard to identify your signature sins, ask people who know you well about your blind spots. Chances are, they will tell you!

The last step in this process is to confess your sins to a trusted believer. James writes, "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other, that you may be healed" (5:16). Once I name my signature sins to someone else, they recede in influence. As long as evil is alone with me, it can exert mastery over me. Shame and guilt will do a number on us when they have us all to themselves.

I'm reminded of the old Irish proverb, "Confession is good for the soul." Why do we resist the gracious scrutiny of the only One in the universe who unconditionally loves us when we mess up?



"Confess your sins to each and pray for  
each other that you may be healed"

James 5.16

