

I received a letter in the mail last week from a man in the South who'd read one of the Harmony books and wrote to tell me I wasn't fit to be a minister. **I'm not quite sure how he was able to judge my suitability for ministry by reading a work of comic fiction, but that's what he did, and with much enthusiasm.** Most of the sentences were underlined, there were lots of exclamation points, and the Bible verses he cited were in bold print. He quoted from the letter of James in the New Testament. "Let not many of you become teachers, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness." (James 3:1)

Even before James wrote his letter of advice to the scattered tribes of Israel, we've known that teachers instruct not just with their words, but with their example. **When the reputation of the teacher or leader is tarnished by misconduct, the influence and authority of that person is diminished.** When James wrote that teachers and leaders were judged with greater strictness, I don't think he meant God judged them more strictly. I think he was saying we humans do. We saw this recently when a high school principal was caught driving drunk and had to resign. **Everyone said he was a nice man, but when we read about it in the paper, we knew his leadership days were numbered, that his authority had been compromised.**

One day, when Jesus was talking about teachers and their disciples, he spoke about the importance of leaders being self-aware. **As was often the case, he taught by asking a question, “Can a blind man lead a blind man? Why do you see the speck in someone else’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own?”** That’s a question about self-awareness, and that’s what I want to talk about today. The importance of self-awareness.

“Well,” you might say, “I’m not a leader. Some people are leaders, but I’m a follower.” **And I would say that every person in this room is a leader.** If you’re a teacher, you lead your students to knowledge. If you’re a nurse or doctor or therapist, you lead your patients to health and wholeness. If you’re a parent, you lead your children. If you clerk a committee at our meeting, you provide focus so others can minister more effectively. **All of that is leadership—the opportunity to guide, influence, and inspire others, and each of us do that to some extent.** Now some of us lead more people than others of us, but we all lead. It’s nonsense for someone to think he or she is only a follower. Each of us have the capacity to influence others. Even children have the power to influence others. My friends just had a little baby girl. She’s only two weeks old and she already has that household dancing to her tune. Seven pounds and she is calling the shots. **Everyone in this room has the power to guide, inspire, and influence those around them.**

So the question isn't, "Am I leader or a follower?" The question is, "How will I lead?" Jesus says leadership begins with self-awareness. **Don't be running around correcting the faults of others while remaining oblivious to your own.** A blind person can't lead a blind person. So good leadership starts with self-awareness. This is why when I went to seminary, I had to meet with a psychologist and take personality tests, so I could become aware of those places in my life that were thin and needed building up. It was a fascinating experience. **The psychologist said, "According to the tests, you love to please people. So people will like you, but be careful, because keeping them happy will exhaust you and if you don't address that adequately you'll burn out within ten years."** But I only heard the "people will like you" part and ten years later, ironically to the very week, I left the pastorate utterly spent, all my resources depleted. I took off a year and a half, worked in log removal, and now I've been here nine years, and feel enthusiastic and fulfilled. **No one likes me, but I'm happy as a clam. ☺**

So we work at log removal. **When I say that, please don't think this means self-abasement or self-denigration.** Jesus isn't inviting us to demean ourselves or feel worthless. The world does that enough to us. **Removing the log from our own eyes isn't about beating ourselves up and tearing ourselves down.**

It is about looking honestly at those places where the fabric of our lives has worn a little thin or has torn a bit and needs mending. **Like any mending project, it can be very rewarding.** I popped a button off my shirt last week and sewed it back on. I didn't ask Joan to do it for me. I would have, but she wasn't home. So I just got a needle and thread and sewed it back on and it was very satisfying.

But in addition to that, it was an object lesson for me, a reminder of all the times I've seen others whose lives were full of rips and tears and missing buttons and how I was so busy judging them I didn't notice how tattered and threadbare my own life had become.

Boy, this hit home with me recently. For many years I had a low opinion of people suffering from addictions. I saw them as morally inferior, tended to avoid them, and was unsympathetic to their condition. **I took an inordinate pride in my own family, who it seemed had dodged that demon.** I was very proud of that, even to the point of arrogance, thinking my family was better than other families. **Of course, we're all proud of the people we're close to, but excessive pride has a way of blinding us to reality.** It diminishes our ability to be self-aware, and doesn't permit us to see things as they really are. And this happened to me. **While noticing the splinters in other people's lives, I was oblivious to the logs in mine.**

Then someone in my family, someone very close to me, began a downward spiral into alcoholism, and this myth of family perfection could not be sustained. **So now the day has come to mend this torn fabric, to be less prideful and more honest, less judgmental of other's failings and more compassionate.** I don't feel my life has been diminished by this experience. Indeed, I feel just the opposite—that I've been handed a wonderful opportunity to learn and grow.

What good advice Jesus gave us. Don't be blind to your own faults. Don't be judging others. Show compassion. **If we see someone else looking a little threadbare, a little worn and ragged, remember those times in our lives when we didn't have it all together, when the fabric of our lives had worn a little thin, and let that memory move us toward compassion and away from judgment.**

So in that spirit of healthy self-examination, I ask you, my dear friends, where has your life worn a little thin? What have you been blind to? And what might you do to see and live more clearly?