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This morning's Gospel contains two of probably the best known phrases in all of Scriptures, *Can the blind lead the blind?* and *the mote or speck in thy brother's eye...and the beam in thine own eye*. While we might have preconceived notions about how these phrases should be applied, and what they refer to, taken as a whole, Jesus is here addressing how we should treat other people. Jesus' basic instruction on how to treat other people, is *Love your neighbor as yourself*. The Church teaches us that this means we are to love in the Christian sense which requires selfless love, love which acts for the good of others despite the great cost of that love for ourselves. It is ultimately a self-sacrificial love. The supreme example of this kind of love is what Jesus did on the cross. Jesus got nothing out of his own suffering and death, and yet it is through His suffering, death and resurrection that we receive the forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life in heaven with God.

What Jesus has to say on this matter of love is startling and challenging. First, He says that God will treat us the same way we treat each other. God will hold us to the same moral standards to which we hold others. If we are unnecessarily critical of the details of another person's behavior, God will be critical of the details of our behavior. If we let other people's behavior anger us to the point that we write them off and condemn them to hell, we run the risk of God doing the same thing to us. Does this mean that we should have no standards at all as to what constitutes acceptable behavior? Of course not. If God wanted us to apply no standards at all to our own behavior or to the behavior of others, he would surely not have bothered to give us the Ten Commandments, or the Summary of the Law, or the Beatitudes, for that matter.

Jesus is concerned about the spirit in which we apply these moral standards and draw conclusions about others. God applies His standards to our behavior, but he doesn't do it either to make himself feel good at our expense or to have a good reason to send us to hell. God applies His standards to our behavior to get us to see where we have gone wrong and to give us the opportunity to admit our sins, repent, and then with his help, to go and sin no more. This is what Jesus means by the words, *Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful*. Mercy does not mean calling wrong right or overlooking bad behavior. God wants to bring us to judgment about our bad behavior so we can turn away from it and be saved. Our human nature, on the other hand, likes

to use another person's bad behavior not as an opportunity to bring him to repentance and salvation but as a way of making ourselves feel good by comparison. This is not what God intends, God calls us to consider our own sinfulness and be merciful to ourselves and to others.

That is what Jesus means by the mote and the beam, the speck and the log. He cautions us not to be too quick to tell other people what is wrong with them, and how, in our great wisdom, we might be able to help them out. Jesus suggests that when we are tempted in such a direction, we should first ask ourselves, "is it possible that the thing that drives me crazy about this other person may be something of which I am guilty, but I would rather point it out in him than face it in myself?" His advice is, of course, to face it in ourselves, confess it, and try with the Holy Ghost's help to do something about it. He concludes, rather acidly, *Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to pull out the mote that is in thy brother's eye.*

Tomorrow is the Prayer Book's feast of St. John the Baptist. He is a crucial figure in the drama of Advent, but it is good to have another chance at the opposite end of the year to give him some thought. John is the character who most clearly connects the Old Testament to the New, and Jesus says of him, *"Among them that are born of women, there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist."* John was imprisoned for calling out King Herod's sin of adultery. There was no mote or speck in John's eye, and as the messenger sent to prepare the way for Christ, he boldly called out the sins of his generation. St. John's clarion call was *repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*. He calls us to repent and be no more spiritually blinded, nor to be led by the blind, but instead to allow ourselves to be led by God, as we pray so wonderfully in the collect for this morning,

*O GOD, the protector of all that trust in thee, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy; Increase and multiply upon us thy mercy; that, thou being our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we finally lose not the things eternal.*