

To Judge, or Not to Judge?

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One of the most oft'-quoted verses in the Bible is Matthew 7:1—"Judge not, that you be not judged." Those engaged in immoral behavior frequently quote this verse when attempting to defend their sinful lifestyle. Certain religionists quote it when being challenged to prove that their questionable practices are backed by biblical authority. A belligerent teenager might be heard reciting this phrase to his parents when they inquire about his occasional association with "the wrong crowd." Skeptics even quote Matthew 7:1 in an attempt to show an inconsistency in Jesus' teachings. From church pews to barstools, from the "Bible belt" to Hollywood, Matthew 7:1 is ripped from its context and bellowed as some kind of scare tactic: "Do you dare judge me? Jesus said, 'Judge not, that you be not judged.'" Allegedly, Jesus meant that we cannot pass judgment on anyone at any time.

Sadly, Matthew 7:1 is not only among the most frequently quoted verses in the Bible, but also is one of the most abused verses in all of Scripture. Its exploitation becomes clear when the entire context of Matthew 7 is studied more carefully. Throughout Matthew chapters 5-7 (often referred to as the Sermon on the Mount), Jesus publicly criticized the Jewish scribes and Pharisees for their self-righteousness and abuse of the Old Testament. Near the beginning of this sermon, Jesus stated: "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). The unrighteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus wanted His audience to understand that self-righteousness would not be permitted in the kingdom of heaven; rather, it would lead to "condemnation" in hell (5:20; cf. 23:14, 33). A follower of God must be "poor in spirit" (5:3), not filled with pride. He must love his enemies, not hate them (5:44). He is to do good deeds, but only to please God, not men (6:1-4). The scribes and Pharisees were guilty of wearing "righteousness" on their sleeves, rather than in their hearts (6:1-8; cf. 23:1-36). It was in the midst of such strong public rebuke that Christ proclaimed:

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me remove the speck from your eye"; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye (Matthew 7:1-5).

In Matthew 6:1-4, Jesus instructed us not to do charitable deeds... "as the hypocrites do" (to be seen of men). In 6:5-8, Jesus told us not to pray... "like the hypocrites" (to be heard of men). In 6:16-18, Jesus taught us not to fast... "like the hypocrites" (to be seen of men). Likewise, in Matthew 7:1-5, Jesus was teaching us that judging another is wrong... when that judgment is hypocritical.

But, what if we are doing charitable deeds to be seen of God? Then by all means, "do good to all men" (Galatians 6:10)! What if our prayers are led from a pure heart and with righteous

intentions? Should we pray? Most certainly (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:17). Can we fast today, if the purpose of our fasting is to be seen of God and not men? Yes. But what about passing judgment? In Matthew 7:1-5, did Jesus condemn all judging, or, similar to the above examples, did He condemn only a certain kind of judging? Matthew 7:5 provides the answer. After condemning unrighteous judgments (7:1-4), Jesus instructed a person to “first remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.” He was saying, in essence, “Get your life right first. Then, in love, address your brother’s problem.” This is consistent with what Paul wrote to the church at Philippi: “Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (2:4). God never intended for Christians to be recluses who never interacted with those around them. Rather, He gave us the responsibility of helping others by lovingly correcting them when they sin. In Matthew 7, Jesus was not suggesting that a person can never judge. He was saying, when you judge, judge righteously (as when we pray, fast, and do good deeds—do it without hypocrisy—John 7:24). Incidentally, Jesus already had judged the Pharisees. Thus, He obviously was not teaching that we should never judge anyone. [See also 1 Corinthians 5:3 wherein the apostle Paul said, “For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already **judged** (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed [sinned].”]

Further proof that Jesus did not condemn all judging can be found throughout the rest of chapter 7. In fact, in the very next verse after His statements about judging, Jesus implicitly commanded that His followers make a judgment. He said: “Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces” (7:6). Disciples of Christ must judge as to who are “dogs” and who are “hogs.” Otherwise, how can we know when not to give that which is holy to “dogs”? Or how can we know when not to cast our pearls before “swine”? Jesus said we must judge between those who are “worthy,” and those who are like dogs and pigs (cf. Matthew 10:12-15; Acts 13:42-46).

A few verses later, Jesus again implied that His disciples must make a judgment: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.” (Matthew 7:15-20)

Question: How can we “watch out” for false prophets if we cannot make judgments as to who the false prophets are? According to Jesus, determining the identity of false teachers involves inspecting “their fruits” and making judgments—righteous judgments.

What does the rest of Scripture have to say to those who regard all judging as being wrong?

- In his letter to the churches of Galatia, Paul commanded those “who are spiritual” to restore those who have been “overtaken in any trespass...in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted” (6:1). Certainly, determining who is spiritual and who has sinned involves making judgments.

- While addressing an issue in the church at Corinth where a man had “his father’s wife” (1 Corinthians 5:1), Paul wrote through inspiration:

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.... I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person.... Therefore, put away from yourselves the evil person (1 Corinthians 5:4-5,11,13b).

Paul commanded the church at Corinth to purge a fornicator from its midst. This man’s sin was even to be addressed in a public manner. **To follow Paul’s command, the church had to make a judgment.** Paul also commanded the congregation to “put away” others who were living in a state of sin [and who would not truly repent]. **When we make such judgments today, they are to be righteous judgments that are based on facts and carried out in love [and truth with wisdom, according to God’s Word].** Such judging should be performed in a merciful spirit (Luke 6:36-37), and for the purpose of saving souls (“that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus”—1 Corinthians 5:5). **Judgments are to be made from good (righteous) intentions. But judgments nevertheless must be made.**

- Paul instructed the church at Ephesus to “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them” (5:11). And to the Christians in Rome he wrote: “Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them” (16:17). **Were churches going to have to make important judgments to comply with Paul’s commands? Yes.**
- Similarly, the apostle John indicated that “whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine [the true Gospel of Christ], do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds” (2 John 9-11, emp. added). To determine whether or not we are going to allow someone into our homes, necessitates a judgment on our part.
- Finally, if all judgments concerning spiritual matters are wrong, then why would Jesus have commanded His disciples to go and teach the lost (Matthew 28:19-20; cf. Acts 8:4)? Before one ever teaches the Gospel to someone who is not a Christian, a judgment must be made. Is this person lost in sin, or saved “in Christ”? If we are to teach the lost today, then it is necessary to determine who is lost and who is not.

If we never can “judge people” in any sense, as many today suggest (through the misuse of Matthew 7:1), then the above commands never could be obeyed. **But, they must be obeyed! Thus, (righteous) judgments must be made.**

The popular and politically correct idea that “all judging is wrong” is anti-biblical. Those who teach that Jesus was condemning all judging in Matthew 7:1 are guilty of ignoring the context of the passage, as well as the numerous verses throughout the rest of the Bible which teach that **judging the sinful lifestyles of others is necessary.** One key ingredient that we need to incorporate in every judgment is “righteousness.” Jesus commanded that His disciples first get their own lives right with God; then they can “see clearly” to be of help to others who are overcome in their faults (Matthew 7:5). As Jesus told the Jews in the temple on one occasion: “Judge not according to appearance, but judge righteous judgment” (John 7:24).