

The Duty of Discernment and Judging in our Tolerant “Judge Not” World

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on August 17, 2008

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If I were to ask you what was the most quoted Bible verse in America through the middle part of the 20th century, what would you say? (John 3:16 probably)

Now what about the last few decades? According to Josh McDowell’s research, the most quoted Bible verse now at least in this country is Matthew 7:1. The most quoted verse is no longer John 3:16, or Psalm 23 (or the Hebrew *shema* historically) or Romans 8:28 or others. The most quoted verse is also the most misquoted verse: Matthew 7:1 (“Judge not lest you be judged”)

Matthew 7:1-5 (NASB95) ¹“**Do not judge so that you will not be judged.** ²“For **in the way you judge**, you will be judged; and **by your standard** of measure, it will be measured to you. ³“Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but **do not notice the log that is in your own eye?** ⁴“Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, the log is in your own eye? ⁵“You hypocrite, **first** take the log out of your own eye, and **then you will see clearly** to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.

You can understand why this passage is quoted so often and yet if it is not understood in its context of this passage and in context with Christ’s teaching as a whole you can also understand why it is so often *mis*-quoted.

Is all judging forbidden here? What about judges in legal courts?

Leo Tolstoy, Russian novelist, said based on verse 1, “Christ totally forbids the human institution of the law court ... [he] could mean nothing else by these words.” But of course, the Sermon on the Mount is discussing personal ethics and traits, it’s not talking about government and judicial systems which Romans 13 supports.

You find this verse in surprising places.

- This is one verse I’ve seen printed out in secular newspapers on more than one occasion, it may be the only verse you might see quoted on those terrible TV talk shows I won’t even name or reality shows, sometimes with the reference but more commonly just part of the verse anytime when accused of sin or wrong. I found a website that say this is a frequently occurring verse in reggae (the same is also true in R&B and even rap songs and other genres)
- If you’ve heard of the theologian Bob Marley, I read this week where he reportedly began his recording career with “Judge Not,” recorded in 1962 when Marley was about 17, a song at least loosely based on Matthew 7

*Don't you look at me so smug and say I'm going bad.
Who are you to judge me, and the life I live?
I know that I'm not perfect And that I don't claim to be
So, before you point your finger
Make sure your hands are clean.
Judge not, before you judge yourself,
Judge not, if you're not ready for judgment*

That resonates with many and is a good illustration of how many understand this NT phrase “judge not”

- Some are bolder, such as a song from another genre celebrating someone’s immorality and prostitution lifestyle on the weekends, but saying “it’s none of your business ... [judge not] ... there’s only judge out there and that’s God so just chill and let my father do his job”

There’s this great comfort many take that God is the judge, not man, and He will do is job (“so back off me and leave me alone”). But if you really understand who God is and that He is a righteous and Holy Judge who will do His job of eternally punishing all unrepentant sinners, that shouldn’t comfort you, that should terrify you! Far better to have a mere man judge your heart or actions wrongly here on earth, than to have the God of the Universe judge you rightly and give you what you deserve and to punish you for what is really in your heart, and for all eternity!!

God’s Word says it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God! Too bad *that verse* is not so well known!

I used to be much more immersed in pop culture and television (which I rarely watch now, although I have enjoyed the Olympics this week), but I’ve seen enough in the past how this verse is often used to essentially say “no one has a right to tell me my lifestyle is wrong, in fact you’re the one who’s wrong for judging.”

On talk shows highlighting people’s ridiculous behavior and disputes, inevitably someone with great emotion will let loose with “You can’t judge me – the Bible says Judge not”

Should they really take comfort that God will judge them, not man?

Is this what Jesus intended by these words?

Is He pleased to be the poster child and proof text for the postmodern redefinition of tolerance to excuse any sin?

Webster’s definition of tolerance: “to recognize and respect [others’ beliefs, practices, etc.] without sharing them ... to bear or put up with [someone or something not especially liked].”

It’s one thing to say everyone has a right to their belief, but the “New Tolerance” of our day says *every belief is right*.

One of the world’s most well-known philosophers defines it this way “All opinions are equal, and there is no rational way to discern between them.”

United Nations “Declaration of Principles on Tolerance” says “Tolerance ... involves the rejection of dogmatism and absolutism.” In 1981 they adopted the “Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief” (what about “intolerant Christians”?)

Dr. Robert Simon, Professor of History at Hamilton College in Indiana, said he had never met a student who denied that the holocaust happened, but that what he is seeing increasingly is something that's far worse – nearly a quarter of his students cannot bring themselves to say that the killing of millions of people is wrong. He says “Upwards of 20% of my students are reluctant to make any moral judgments, even about the holocaust ... while these students may deplore what the Nazis did their disapproval is expressed *as a matter of personal taste, of personal preference not moral judgment.*” As one student said “Of course I dislike the Nazis but who is to say that they are morally wrong?”

I heard a radio talk show where the host was talking with a caller who didn't believe in moral absolutes – he asked her “is it ever right under any circumstance to molest or torture human children just for fun?” and the caller just could not bring herself to say yes.

Josh McDowell who has studied this trend extensively and spoken on it made the statement in light of such relativistic nonsense:

“America as a whole has lost the right to judge that what the terrorists did on 9/11 is wrong.”

One pastor tells the story of a small-group Bible study where the leader said that sleeping together before marriage is displeasing to God. “Who are you to judge?” One student asked. “And by the way, who of us is perfect? We have no right to sit in judgment of someone else's morality.”

McDowell tells story of him and close friend & conservative Baptist pastor and his daughter. When judging came up in the conversation his daughter said “Well, I don't think a Christian should ever judge or be judgmental about anything. The Bible says ‘Judge Not.’” And the pastor was beaming with pride.

My wife Jaime a few years back had a conversation with a dear Christian who she was trying to explain that just saying a prayer doesn't make you a Christian, and my wife was immediately chastised “Hey, you can't judge.”

I once had a conversation with someone about a situation where a pastor had sex outside of marriage while in ministry and why he should step down because he didn't meet the Biblical standard of being above approach. This person said to me “Well, you know Jesus said ‘judge not’ ... I don't know that we should judge.” We had a similar conversation about women being in ministry.

Many Christians will say things like “who are you to judge?” The implication is that you and I have no right to say “this lifestyle is wrong” or “that is heresy” or “that TV preacher is a false teacher.”

“Who are you to judge or say that?” This is common if someone disagrees with your view, instead of responding to the argument they are attacking you, instead of challenging the *point* you challenge the person. In logic this is called an *ad hominem* (i.e., “you're just stupid” or “you're a legalist” or “what do you know?” – a form of name-calling.) It's the great escape, they think – if someone confronts or paints you in a corner, bust out Matthew 7:1!

When we as Christ-followers, though, say what God and His Word says, the strength of our case is not based on who we are, it's on the content and source of our statement. The challenge "Who are you to say?" misses the point, because what **God** says is infinitely more important than my opinion. I'm not making a judgment by my own authority – ("because I say it this is how it is") – I'm appealing to Scripture which should be the final authority.

Have you ever encountered that yourself? People who are caught up with bad teaching and/or bad thinking – many times when you bring up a Scriptural objection to their belief or practice, instead of actually dealing with the Bible verse or argument, they'll just say "well you're just judgmental or legalistic ... since when are you perfect", etc. It's a lot easier to criticize or label others so that you don't have to think about their point.

The Duty of Discernment - What does Matthew 7:1 mean?

A few comments on the text – present general command with a negative, carries idea of "make it your habit not to be a judgmental person," i.e., don't be known as a professional critic or complainer

There is a different form in Greek Jesus could have used to make an emphatic absolute prohibition, i.e, never at any time under any circumstances. Present tense often means that it is a characteristic – don't make it your characteristic to be this kind of person.

IMMEDIATE CONTEXT: Keep reading Matthew 7. Notice that Jesus immediately tells them there are some things they need to judge or discern – look at verse 6, who are dogs, swine?

We need to be able to judge when it is not wise or when it's a waste of time with some or with some circumstances.

Look at verse 15 – how are we to beware of false teachers if we can never judge that someone is a false teacher? He tells us twice "by their fruit you will recognize them" (16, 20) which requires critical judgment. If we lack judgment or discernment over doctrine, we are disobeying Jesus in the rest of this chapter.

Jesus then talks about making sure you go through the narrow gate instead of the broad gate, which of course, requires discernment and making judgments about the false way.

In Matthew 16 Jesus asks Peter "who do you say that I am?" Peter needs to make a judgment about who Jesus is. Should Peter have said "sorry you told me not to judge in chapter 7, so I can't make a judgment call about someone, because all judging is sin"?

What about Matthew 18:15 when Jesus says if your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private? How are you going to do that without making a judgment based on the object right-and-wrong standard of scripture? Jesus of course as God doesn't contradict Himself – clearly there is a time to judge and a time not, or perhaps we could say a type of judging that's wrong and a type that's not.

Our public scripture reading this morning was Ecclesiastes 3 where Solomon writes that there is a time for many things. And that whole section speaks of our need to discern or judge when actions are wise and appropriate or when right or wrong.

Jesus in Matthew 19:28 uses the same Greek word “judge” to encourage his disciples that because of all they have given up in His future earthly kingdom they will sit on 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel. If all “judging” was sinful, Jesus wouldn’t have said that – of course Jesus Himself judges and we know He never sins, so we can’t take Matthew 7:1 to mean all judging is sinful.

This same Jesus in John 7:24 says “judge with righteous judgment” - There Jesus is commanding to judge, using the same Greek word. “Who are you to judge?” If you’re a Christian, the question could be “who are we NOT to judge some things? Who in the world am I to disobey Christ when he commands me to judge in John 7:24?”

Paul also commanded his readers to judge using this Greek word:
I Cor. 10:15 “I speak as to wise men; **you judge what I say**”
11:13 again “**you judge for yourselves**”

In Acts 15 and 16 this same Greek word is used for the Spirit-led judging of doctrine and its practical application, which God wants

In Acts 16:15, Lydia says after she believed in Christ and was baptized, “If you have **judged me [same word]** to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay.”

The apostles don’t say “Whoa, we can’t judge you, Jesus said we were never to judge anything or anyone, sorry Lydia, gotta go”

Judging is a normal part of everyday life, and is often a valuable thing. Did you know the Bible calls on the church to judge overt acts of sin and remove repeatedly unrepentant sinners from the church if they don’t respond to appropriate confrontation?

1 Corinthians 5:11 I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. [sounds to me like some judging has to be involved to obey this]. 12 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? 13 But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.

When the day comes that we may have to do that in a public church discipline, I have no doubt some will object and say “that’s judgmental ... you’re judging.” In a sense, they’re right. In fact, in that occasion we would be sinning if we didn’t judge sin by God’s Word and God’s standard. Sometimes it’s a sin not to judge.

Not only are we to judge sinful behavior to be wrong where scripture does, and deal with it, but we are to judge doctrine and teaching by examining it against scripture like the Bereans.

John MacArthur writes (intro to *Charismatic Chaos*):

“It is not unkind to analyze doctrinal differences in light of scripture. It is not necessarily factious to voice disagreement with someone else’s teaching. In fact, we have a moral imperative to examine what is proclaimed in Jesus’ name, and to expose and condemn false teaching and unbiblical behavior. The Apostle Paul felt it necessary at times to rebuke people by name in epistles meant to be read publicly (Phil. 4:2-3; I Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17). John, the apostle of love, wrote a scorching condemnation of Diotrephes, a church leader who was ignoring the apostles’ teaching (3 John 9-10). As his second epistle shows, John’s view of real love was inextricably bound with truth. In fact, love apart from truth is nothing more than hypocritical sentimentality. That sentimentality is running rampant in evangelicalism today. The Biblical challenge is not to avoid truth that is controversial, but to speak the truth in love”

Later in 1 Corinthians 11 Paul uses the same word judge for the duty of every believer to judge ourselves rightly. We need to start there. That passage is in the context of the communion text we read every month that calls on us to examine ourselves.

All other righteous forms of judgment depend on this honest self-examination. That is what Jesus meant when He said, “First take the log out of your own eye then you will see clearly” to help your brother. It’s not wrong to want to help a brother who’s in pain so he can see, *if we first have dealt with our bigger sins and can see rightly*. In fact Matthew 7 wants us to be able to help our brother.

So to borrow to borrow the famous Shakespeare line “to be or not to be is the question” – it seems the question here is “to judge or not to judge.” Or more specifically, *when* must we judge and not judge, and how should we judge and *how* are we not to judge?

KINDS OF JUDGMENT FORBIDDEN BY THIS TEXT

1. Unrighteous Judging – look back at Matthew 7:1

In the passage in John 7:24 where Jesus commanded us how and when to judge, Jesus says “**Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.**”

So when Christ says in Matthew 7:1 “Judge not lest you be judged” that helps us understand what “judge not” means, and helps us know what we are *not to* judge or *how* we are not to judge

One way to judge unrighteously is explained there as judging by appearances. Judging by mere appearances has been a problem since the days of Samuel trying to choose Israel’s next king.

Jay Adams gives a good illustration of the danger in judging by appearances with the story of Jane who has been away from church for awhile and when you go to talk to her afterwards to say hi, she sticks her nose up in the air and leaves quickly without acknowledging you (when you talk to her later she confesses she had such a bad cold and her nose was about to drip on her new dress or Bible so she had to hustle to her car as quick as possible and honestly didn’t see you).

Another way we can be unrighteous in our judging is to be merciless, to not be gracious.

Look in the context at Matthew 5:7, one of the first statements Jesus began this sermon with: **“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”**

This idea is repeated over and over in the context of the sermon.

What should we do when someone wrongs us? We may judge what they did to us as sin (and we may be right), but we may not respond in a way that’s not right, we may not sin in return.

⁴⁴“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

Matthew 6:12 ‘And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Matthew 6:14-15 ¹⁴“For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵“But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

Perhaps the most helpful cross-reference is Luke’s parallel account of this sermon in Luke 6:

36 **“Be merciful**, just as your Father is merciful. 37 Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and **do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned.** 38 “Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, *and* running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.” 39 And He also spoke a parable to them: “A blind man cannot guide a blind man, can he? **Will they not both fall into a pit?** 40 A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher. 41 “Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 42 “Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother’s eye.”

Luke 7:41 “A moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they were unable to repay, he **graciously forgave** them both. So which of them will love him more?” Simon answered and said, “I suppose the one whom he forgave more.” And He said to him, **“You have judged correctly.”**

Jesus doesn’t say “Whoa, no judging, never judge!” He commends Simon for judging *correctly*. Our Lord requires us to make correct judgments about certain matters, but we must also be gracious.

Luke 12:55-56 “You hypocrites! You know how to analyze the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why do you not analyze this present time? And **why do you not even on your own initiative judge what is right?**”

Using the same Greek word, Jesus is chastising them for not judging what’s right.

We must judge what is right, but we must not be unrighteous in our judging in any ways.

There’s a second way we’re not to judge, not only unrighteous...

2. Self-Righteous Judging

Matthew 7:1-5 (NASB95) ¹“**Do not judge so that you will not be judged.** ²“**For in the way you judge**, you will be judged; and **by your standard** of measure, it will be measured to you.

Prior righteousness context of Matthew 5:20 “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees (self-righteousness) you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven”

Jesus said at the beginning of this sermon we are to hunger and thirst for true righteousness, and two verses before he says “Judge not” He says “Seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness”

So the context is very much in contrast with self-righteousness vs. true righteousness.

When we judge in a self-righteous or hypocritical way, it is sin.

Matthew 7:2 says “For **in the way you judge**, you will be judged; and **by your standard** of measure, it will be measured to you.

If self-righteousness is how we judge, like the Pharisees, that will be how we are judged, by our own righteousness, not God’s (and we don’t want that).

In the story of Esther in the OT we see Haman ironically receive upon him the gallows by which he wanted to hang Mordecai and the Jews. This is the principle that man reaps what he sows.

Dave Swavely writes of ‘men ... judged in the way that they had judged, and were measured by the same standard by which they measured others. The same thing will happen to you, if you are not careful to avoid sinful judgments and eager to think the best about others. On the other hand, if you are a loving person who “believes all things, hopes all things” about others (1 Cor. 13:7), you will find that others will be more likely to give you the benefit of the cross as well” -*Who are you to Judge? The Dangers of Judging*, 45

#3 – Hypercritical Judging

³“Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye

Are you a speck hunter? Are you everyone’s eye dust-buster?

Do you make mountains out of molehills? Or as Jesus said of the Pharisees, do you strain out a gnat and swallow a camel?

There is a disproportionate or imbalanced focus there. Your brother with something in his eye does need help, but there’s a difference between genuine concern and critical condemning spirit. Your brother does need help to see better, but you’re not the one to help because you’re blinded by your own sin – there’s a big beam in your vision. Older commentaries call it “ensoriousness”

John Calvin’s commentary on this verse says:

‘These words of Christ do not contain an absolute prohibition *from judging*, but are intended to cure a disease, which appears to be natural to us all. We see how all flatter themselves, and every man passes a severe censure on others. This vice is attended by some strange enjoyment: for there is hardly any person who is not tickled with the desire of inquiring into other people’s faults. All acknowledge, indeed, that it is an intolerable evil, that those who overlook their own vices are so inveterate against their brethren ...

It is not necessary that believers should become blind, and perceive nothing, but only that they should refrain from an undue eagerness to *judge*

... To *judge*, therefore, means here, to be influenced by curiosity in inquiring into the actions of others. This disease, in the first place, draws continually along with it the injustice of condemning any trivial fault, as if it had been a very heinous crime; and next breaks out into the insolent presumption of looking disdainfully at every action, and passing an unfavourable judgment on it, even when it might be viewed in a good light. ... *That you may not be judged.* He denounces a punishment against those severe judges, who take so much delight in sifting the faults of others.'

John Stott defines judging in this verse as: "to judge them harshly. The censorious critic is a fault-finder who is negative and destructive towards other people and enjoys actively seeking out their failings. He puts the worst possible construction on their motives, pours cold water on their schemes and is ungenerous towards their mistakes ... To sum up, the command to *judge not* is not a requirement to be blind, but rather a plea to be generous. Jesus does not tell us to cease to be mean (by suspending our critical powers ...) but to renounce the presumptuous ambition to be God (by setting ourselves up as judges)."

Christ's sermon begins with self-examination, examine yourself
 Do you have broken contrite spirits before God (5:3)?
 Examine to see if you are mourning over our own sin (4)?
 Are you gentle / meek / humble before God and others (5)?

4. Hypocritical (not just hyper-critical but hypocritical)

Read Matthew 7:3-5a again

Several times in chapter 6 Jesus tells his disciples to not be like the hypocrites in the way they give, pray, fast – now in their judging.

Don't be like the Pharisees who might catch a woman in adultery and bring her before Jesus quick to condemn her and call for her death, when they have committed great or greater sins in the eyes of God in their heart or in their hypocrisy. Read Matthew 23 and you'll see that religious hypocrites received the harshest rebukes from Jesus. Let's not be so eager to cast the first stone.

Matthew 7 doesn't say that we have to be sinless to help another sinner (that will never happen) but we do have to clean up the massive glaring blinding sin problems in our life before we will be a useful tool in the hand of the carpenter from Nazareth.

Galatians 6:1 Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, **you who are spiritual**, restore such a one **in a spirit of gentleness**; each one **looking to yourself**, so that you too will not be tempted.

Our attitude is concern, not condemnation, because but for the grace of God we would be caught in those same trespasses (and we still might, if we don't take heed to ourselves). Don't be arrogant

1 Corinthians 4:5-7 (NASB95)

⁵Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, *but wait* until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of *men's* hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God. ⁶Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. ⁷For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

Three other ways we are not to judge as seen in this text:

5. Judging Hastily

v. 5 "before the time" (cf. Prov 18:13, 17, James 1:19)

6. Judging Motives or What You Don't Know

v. 5b "wait until the Lord comes who will bring both to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts"

7. Judging Things Beyond What is Written in Scripture (v. 6).