

Understanding Judgment
Matthew 7:1-5
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

The Gospel of Matthew opens with a series of proofs that Jesus is the Christ, the King of the Jews. This led to the calling of His disciples and His instruction to them through the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7. These chapters are the first of five long discourses by Jesus that Matthew recorded in his Gospel. After correcting the traditional teaching of the Jewish leaders (Matthew 5:21-48), and after rebuking the self-serving religious practices of the Jewish leaders (Matthew 6:1-18), Jesus addresses the importance of faith in God rather than in money. We should seek His kingdom and He will provide our needs.

The preceding context of Matthew 6 involves the commands by Jesus to not practice our righteousness before men to be noticed by them (6:1), to not store up our treasures on earth but in heaven (6:19-21), and to not worry (6:25). The relationship between the command to not judge in Matthew 7:1-5 with the context is not easily seen. There appears to be a transition from how to think about our own life to how to think about the lives of others. Certainly if we truly seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, we will be led to think rightly about others and not bring unrighteous judgment upon them.

This section of this discourse begins with the command to not judge. This is followed by the reason we ought to be motivated to follow Jesus' command to not judge. Matthew 7:3-5 then brings a piercing illustration of the problem of unrighteous judgment. Taken together, this ought to be a stern warning for those inclined to pass judgment upon others.

The command to not judge (7:1)

Jesus' statement to not judge so that judgment will not come upon us has been greatly misconstrued by those seeking to escape the condemnation of God's truth. It cannot mean that if we make no judgments of anyone at any time then we will escape the judgment of God. This is because while it is impossible to never make any judgments on anyone, even if we did not do so we still are responsible to God for all our other sin. This statement "you will not be judged" should be understood as "you will not be judged for the sin of unrighteous judgment." The subordinating conjunction "so that" explains that by refraining from unrighteous judgment we will not be judged for violating this command of Jesus.

Obviously, this command to not judge does not instruct us to make no judgments whatsoever for many reasons, including:

1. Various authorities have a responsibility to make judgments. The government *“does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil”* (Romans 13:4). Similarly, church leaders have responsibility to make evaluations through church discipline (Matthew 18:15-20) and parents must make judgments upon their children (Ephesians 6:4).
2. The words of Matthew 7:5, *“then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye”* communicates there is a role for judgment in serving another.
3. We are specifically instructed by Jesus to judge rightly. *“Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment”* (John 7:24). We must judge with righteous judgment and this is the opposite of judging by appearances.
4. We have to make judgments in order to evaluate church leaders (1 Timothy 3:1-13) and minister to people according to the Scripture (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 5:14).

If we can accept that some judgment must be made, then what does Jesus forbid when He says “do not judge?” The answer to this question is found by distinguishing between righteous judgment (John 7:24) and unrighteous judgment. Unrighteous judgment is addressed in James 4:11-12:

“Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?”

We gain an understanding of unrighteous judgment with the command “do not speak against one another.” One characteristic of unrighteous judgment is that it is against people, seeking to tear down rather than build up. *“Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing”* (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Another aspect of unrighteous judgment is that it *“speaks against the law and judges the law.”* In other words, it is opposed to the law of God. Righteous judgment is aligned with the truth of the Scripture and unrighteous judgment is inconsistent with the truth of

the Scripture. Unrighteous judgment acts in opposition to the righteous word of God that the Lord has established for us.

The most egregious way that unrighteous judgment occurs is when a judgment is made against someone who is doing the revealed will of God. The Pharisees were guilty of this by condemning Jesus for casting out demons (Matthew 12:22-24) or the Jews from Asia condemning Paul for preaching the gospel (Acts 21:27-28).

A much more common manifestation of unrighteous judgment occurs when a judgment is made against someone that is outside of the law of God. The history of the church is full of these types of evil judgments. There was a time when Christians could not miss church on a Sunday (contra Romans 14:5) and when Christians could not drink alcohol (contra 1 Timothy 5:23). Christians in our church have been judged by their attire, by their parenting methods or schooling options, by their choices on where to live, by how picked up their home is, by their choice of music, and more. Our published position paper on *Moral and Non-Moral Issues* sought to clarify what are biblical issues versus what are simply matters of personal preference. Yet this will always be an issue.

Romans 14:1-15:7 teaches us the freedom that we must extend to one another regarding matters that are not explicitly sinful in the revealed will of God. This section of Paul's Epistle to the Romans begins with the instruction to accept one another. *"Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions"* (Romans 14:1). It also ends with the instruction to accept one another. *"Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God"* (Romans 15:7).

We are responsible to accept one another *"so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (Romans 15:6). Unrighteous judgment causes conflict and division rather than peace and unity. It is damaging to the body of Christ.

A subtle way that unrighteous judgment occurs is when one application of a general principle of Scripture is used to condemn another application of a general principle of Scripture. The one passing judgment then views themselves as righteous without recognizing the truth that there are many potential applications of principles of Scripture. Rather than recognizing that each one has their own responsibility for making applications of Scripture, this type of judgment sees one's own wisdom as prevailing over others. It is rooted in the exaltation of one's own opinions regarding a supposed wise application. We can have an opinion of the right application but each one has the

responsibility to apply their Word to their own lives. Note these are principles, not commands that require a necessary application.

This unrighteous judgment regarding the law of God is a manifestation of pride. The preceding verse to James 4:11-12 is *"Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you"* (James 4:10). Unrighteous judgment exalts a person's own understanding of life's circumstances to the place of the word of God. It is not only speaking against another, it is also against God Himself.

This is why James 4:11 says, *"He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it."* When we judge our brother unrighteously we are not a doer of the law but a judge of it. We have exalted our perspective to the place of God. Therefore, we are speaking against what God has revealed to us.

Finally, we must note that church leaders are not in danger of unrighteous judging by exercising their prerogative to select people for ministry purposes according to the qualifications of the Scripture. Some people make for more capable ministry leaders than others and church leaders must serve the local church in selecting the appropriate servants of the Lord. Of course, leaders can potentially unrighteously ignore what the Scripture teaches about selecting leaders and can also unwisely apply the Scripture in their choices. But the practice of selecting people for ministry tasks is necessary.

The nature of the judgment (7:2)

We have established that unrighteous judgment opposes God's law, creates disunity among believers and does not edify. Matthew 7:2 adds a crucial motivation for us to not judge others. If we judge others unrighteously then the standard of measure of our unrighteous judgment will be applied to us.

This judgment in kind is seen in James 2:13, *"For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment."* As we are unmerciful, the Lord will be unmerciful to us. As we judge wrongly, our standard will be applied to us.

To be clear, we do not avoid judgment by not judging. God will deal justly with mankind (cf. Genesis 18:25). *"And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds"* (Revelation 20:13). Man's deeds will be judged rightly by the

Lord. The only way to avoid judgment is through faith in Jesus Christ. *“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life”* (John 5:24).

For true believers in Christ, our judgment will involve our rewards (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). The unrighteous judgment that we participate in will involve the judgment of our rewards rather than in regard to condemnation. *“Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”* (Romans 8:1). Yet if we choose to judge people in ways beyond God’s commands in the Scripture, this will be factored into the judgment of our rewards. For believers and unbelievers, our standard of measure will be measured to us.

There is a difference between judgment for condemnation and judgment for service. This is particularly true for church leadership. Evaluations must be made on the character qualities of elders (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). These not only involve matters of righteous conduct (which are largely subjective) but they also involve ability, such as *“able to teach”* (1 Timothy 3:2). Titus 1:9 expands on this necessary ability for eldership, *“holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.”*

Hypocrisy in judgment (7:3-5)

Jesus describes the problem of hypocrisy in judging with a dramatic word picture of a log versus a speck in one’s eye. The word translated “speck” is a wooden splinter. In the context of being in one’s eye, this would be a very small particle of wood that would irritate the eye. The word translated “log” is a beam or plank that a house would upon. This beam would stick out from the house which would look impossibly grotesque in one’s eye.

There are a few aspects of this illustration of the speck and the log. First is the difficulty of doing any activity when something is in your eye is evident to the audience of this teaching. It certainly is a hindrance in any ministry.

Also, the comparison between the size of a small, annoying speck is set in contrast to the enormity of the beam. This speaks to the stark difference between the problem that exists with the one exercising judgment and the problem. This refers to the large problem the one judging has in comparison to the small issue of the one being judged. The Pharisee suffered from this problem in light of Jesus’ condemnation of them in Matthew 23:23-24, *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and*

mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!"

Furthermore, the one with the log in their eye is unaware of this fact (*"but do not notice the log that is in your own eye"* in Matthew 7:3). This speaks to the foolishness of the one judging, for it would be impossible to not notice such a large beam. Often people who hypocritically judge others are completely unaware of their sinfulness even when this issue is raised.

This word picture is far from hypothetical. The ministry approach that seeks to fix people's problems is often practiced by people who have far worse problems themselves but are oblivious to it. Sometimes they are guilty of the very same thing themselves. It is remarkable where the path of unrighteous judgment leads. Judgmental hypocrisy forever plagues the church of Jesus Christ.

The protection against such hypocrisy is to first look to ourselves to be certain that our issue is solved before we address others. Matthew 7:5 indicates that such hypocrisy makes it impossible to view anyone else's problems accurately if we have failed to address our own problems.

While there is certainly an allowance for the role of serving others through their issues, the priority is to first take care of our own personal holiness. This requirement for ministry is also seen in Galatians 6:2, *"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. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another."*

By looking to ourselves, we will avoid the temptation of unrighteous judgment. We ought not to think so highly of ourselves as God's necessary instrumentality to produce life-change in others. Our first responsibility is to take the log out of our own eye. To ignore this and press forward is to think of ourselves as something when we are nothing. We must examine our own work and not be deceived. *"If we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged"* (1 Corinthians 11:31).

If we judge ourselves rightly we will be able to see clearly how to help others. But our help for others must be rooted in the word of God. It is God using His Scripture that brings true change. *"For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of*

men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

When, after we examine ourselves, we seek to remove the speck from our brother’s eye we must do so with fidelity to the word of God. We will recognize the difference between what is prescribed by the Scripture to the church and what is merely described. We will allow for freedom in the application of biblical principles for each person has different circumstances, relationships, responsibilities, etc.

When a command of Scripture is violated we will ensure that it is a specific command, requiring a specific application, rather than a general command which allows for many applications. Examples of general commands that involve wisdom in application include love one another, encourage one another, be patient with all men, etc. Examples of specific commands that demand a specific application include not committing adultery, do not worry, do not judge, etc.

Conclusion

We are taught by Jesus to not judge. Unrighteous judgment is evil and must be opposed in our own lives and in the life of our church. It is the manifestation of pride that exalts our opinions to the place of the word of God.

As believers in Christ, we are not condemned (Romans 8:1). If our Lord does not condemn us, then neither should our brethren. Unrighteous judgment is not only evil because it is based upon a wrong standard of the elevation of our own opinions to the place of Scripture, it is also evil because it is condemnatory.

“So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:12-13).

Unmerciful people are critical of others and forgiving of themselves. Their criticism serves to destroy the peacefulness among the brethren and divide the church. The kingdom of God is peaceful and *“blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9)*. If we seek to serve others, we will do so in a way that is *“diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3)*.

If we think ourselves to be wise enough to exercise righteous judgment in serving our brethren we should remember the words of James 3:17-18: *“But the wisdom from above*

is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.