

To Judge or not to Judge...

The Question

Should Christians judge? Some seem to think so and others do not. What do Scriptures say? One popular passage is Matthew 7:1, which says, "Judge not, that ye be not judged." That seems simple enough and should solve any argument. However, others may quote 1 Corinthians 2:15, "But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man." At first glance, there appears to be a contradiction between these passages. We know that God does not change and if He is the author of Scripture, there is no disharmony. How can these things be reconciled? That is the subject of this lesson.

Judge Not!

We will begin by looking at Matthew 7:1-5, which is the most frequently quoted passage in this discussion.

Matthew 7:1-5 – "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam [is] in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye."

Context: This passage is in the latter part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, delivered to His early church. Throughout this message, Jesus provides clear directives for Christian behavior and contrasts His truth with the practices of the Pharisees, the most powerful Jewish sect. The Pharisees were often characterized by a judgmental and condemning spirit, in which they pronounced damnation upon those who didn't live up to their standard of morality. Consider the following passages as examples:

Luke 8:9-14 – The Pharisee and the publican

Why do you think Pharisees had such a judgmental spirit towards others?

By judging and belittling others, they made themselves look better in the eyes of men.

Luke 7:36-39 – Simon the Pharisee and the sinful woman

How did Simon's judgmental attitude express itself?

He was inwardly critical about her (a sinner) and Jesus' compassion towards her

Let's break this passage down into some digestible chunks in order to grasp the principles taught here:

Matt. 7:1 – "Judge not, that ye be not judged."

Judge – to pronounce judgment on an individual, to condemn

A sister passage that will help to explain the meaning of Matthew 7:1 is James 4:11-12.

James 4:11-12 – "Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of [his] brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge. There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?"

What is meant by judging another in this passage?

It means to condemn them or their motives and then to voice your judgment to others.

How does one speak evil of the law and judge the law by judging another?

This refers to the "perfect law of liberty" (James 1:25), which I believe is the commandment given by Christ (John 13:34 – "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.) By judging your brother, you violate this passage and annul it by your actions, thus judging and speaking evil of the law.

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Why does James say we should not judge or speak evil of others?

To do so is to put ourselves in the place of God. We do not know what God knows nor can we see what He sees. Only God can see the heart. We are unfit to judge others. Those who are saved are under the perfect law of liberty (not the OT law), not above it!

Based on what we just discovered in James 4:11-12, what does Jesus mean in this passage?

We should not judge or condemn the motives and hearts of others, which we cannot see.

To further anchor this point, let's look at a comment Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

1 Corinthians 4:1-5 – “Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self. For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God.”

Why did Paul say he wasn't concerned about man's judgment of?

He knows that other men couldn't see his heart or take the place of God. Their judgment would not stand.

What did Paul say about his assessment of himself? Was it valid?

He couldn't find anything wrong about himself, but that didn't make it a valid assessment. Paul makes it clear that he is not qualified to judge his own heart, much less the hearts of others.

Proverbs 21:2 – “Every way of a man is right in his own eyes: but the LORD pondereth the hearts.”

At what point did Paul say that we would be able to rightly judge?

When the Lord returns and makes all things clear, even the depths of our very hearts. At that point, we can enjoy praise from God, rather than the praise of men. The praise of God is worth so much more than what any man can give. The praise of man is like a blind man's praise of a painting. How can he see?

Looking back at Matthew 7:1, what is the danger of having a judgmental spirit?

We will put ourselves under the judgment of God, the supreme and lawful judge of man.

Matthew 7:2 – “For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.”

Measure – here is means amount, or standard

Mete – to measure

What is the point of this passage?

The same unbiblical standard which we use to judge others will be used against us.

Consider the following passages and Scriptural examples. How do we see this principle fulfilled in them?

Esther 7:10 – Haman was hung on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai

Judges 1:6-7 – The king that cut off the thumbs and big toes of his enemies received the same fate

Matthew 26:51-52 - He who lives by the sword dies by the sword

Matthew 5:7 – Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy

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Matthew 7:3-4 – “And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam [is] in thine own eye?”

Mote – a splinter, a dry twig or straw

Beam – a stick of timber, an important structural member of a house

Does the brother that has a mote in his eye have a problem?

Yes, a splinter in the eye is a serious problem. You can’t see well and it causes constant irritation. It is not something to be ignored.

What kind of bigger problem (beam) could one brother have in his eye that wouldn’t be noticed as he tried to correct the splinter in his brother’s eye? (Re-read James 4:11-12)

I believe it is the very judgmental spirit (lack of Biblical love) which Jesus is preaching against. James 4:11-12 refers to one who judges as speaking against the law (of liberty) and becoming a judge of it. This is the greater sin. Remember that Christ’s command to us was to love one another.

Matthew 7:5 – “Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye.”

This verse clarifies the bounds of the judgment against which Jesus is preaching. It is very important to understand this verse and its implications in order to begin to harmonize this passage with other Scriptural passages that speak of exercising righteous judgment

Why does Jesus refer to the brother with a beam in his eye as a hypocrite?

Because he had his own issues that he needed to deal with before helping others with theirs.

What was the two-fold instruction given to the brother with a beam in his eye?

1. Repent over your own sin
2. Then, help your brother deal with his sin issue

Read 2 Samuel 12:1-7 and Psalm 51, which concern David’s sin with Bathsheba. How do we see this principle illustrated here?

David was ready to pass judgment on the man in Nathan’s illustration before realizing that he was that man. We see David go to remove the mote while ignoring the beam in his own eye. In David’s prayer for forgiveness in Psalm 51, we see David acknowledge that he must first have his own sin forgiven before he can be a help to others.

It may have seemed to you that Jesus was condemning all forms of judgment in this passage. However, He now gives instruction for one brother to confront another brother about his sin. Isn’t that judgment? Read Job 2:7-10 and discuss what Job says to his wife. Remember the Bible said this was not sin.

Job rebuked his wife for speaking as one of the foolish women speaks.

Read Ephesians 4:29-32. What principles can we take from this passage that will help us reconcile what we have learned about a judgmental spirit and what we are starting to learn about righteous judgment?

1. Confront the problem, not the person
2. Let all of our speech be edifying (building up) towards others – speech that will help them
3. Put away a hurtful, condemning attitude
4. Have a loving, forgiving attitude that always seeks reconciliation

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Judging Righteous Judgment

We have learned that there is a type of condemning judgment that Jesus denounced and there is a type of righteous judgment that has a godly motivation. We will now discuss this type of judgment. Specifically, we will discuss two issues: when to judge and how to judge.

Judgment in Everyday Life

The type of judgment we exercise in everyday life is more conventionally called discernment rather than judgment. When we discern, we evaluate the qualities of an object, ideal, statement, or action to determine whether it is good or bad. This is a necessary tool for us to function competently as Christians.

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 – “Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil.”

Prove – test, discern, examine

Read 1 John 4:1, a sister passage, and discuss how we should treat different opinions that are brought to us about God and His Word.

We are to listen with an open mind, not necessarily believing everything we are told, but not quenching the Spirit and closing ourselves off to the thoughts of others. God has given us the ability to discern that we might know His truth. None of us are perfect in our understanding of His Word and we all have room to grow.

Does Acts 17:10-12 harmonize with your answer?

Yes. The Bereans didn't reject the Word of Christ, but searched the Scriptures in order to discern whether the message brought was true. We should have that type of openness. Many times Christians miss out on blessings because they have closed themselves out to God and the different ways in which He can work.

Discernment is supposed to lead to action. What action are we exhorted to by this passage?

Once we find something true, we are to cling to it and embrace it. When we find things that are wrong, we are to abstain from them.

Philippians 1:9-11 – “And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.”

How are knowledge and judgment (discernment) functions of love?

Knowledge is a necessary ingredient to discernment, which is a necessary for obedience to Christ. Through discernment, we may know what is right and true and then obey the revelation of God. Through obedience to Christ, we may more perfectly love Him and others and exhibit the fruits of the Spirit, which brings Him glory.

Judgment in our Relationships with Others

Our ability to judge or discern the potential character of others is necessary for our well-being. There are some people who have a pattern of destructive behavior towards themselves and others. Discerning their actions are necessary for our safety. It is also necessary for us to obey God. He has called us to be in the world, but not of the world. To fulfill this commandment, we need to discern how close of a relationship we should have with others.

Proverbs 6:12-15 – “A naughty person, a wicked man, walketh with a froward mouth. He winketh with his eyes, he speaketh with his feet, he teacheth with his fingers; Frowardness [is] in his heart, he deviseth mischief continually; he soweth discord. Therefore shall his calamity come suddenly; suddenly shall he be broken without remedy.”

We obviously should avoid a “naughty person”. How does this passage teach us to discern?

Listen to their language, both verbal and non-verbal. Look at their actions. We should avoid someone who is trying to cause trouble or strife. It will come back to haunt them. You don't want to be there when it does.

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Proverbs 7:10-11 – “And, behold, there met him a woman with the attire of an harlot, and subtil of heart. (She is loud and stubborn; her feet abide not in her house:”

This is an excerpt from Solomon’s description of a young man that was seduced by a prostitute. How does this passage teach us to discern?

In this case, her attire, the place she was hanging out (on a street corner, rather than at her house), her stubbornness, and the volume of her speech revealed something about her character.

Psalms 1:1 – “Blessed [is] the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.”

God wants to protect our purity by limiting our exposure to sinful influences. How do we reconcile the commandment to not judge others with the commandment to not company with the ungodly?

While we cannot judge their heart, we can discern the quality of their actions. Based upon the pattern we see in their life, we must decide whether a close relationship with that person is God’s will. It is one thing to have a friendly relationship with others so that we can be a light to them for Christ. It is another to have a close relationship in which we allow them to influence our behavior.

Remember 2 Timothy 2:22, “Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.”

Judgment in the Church

This is the final category we will look at concerning when to judge. We will not go into this in great depth, but we will clarify the need to fulfill this obligation.

Matthew 18:15-16 – “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

Why is it necessary to have two or three witnesses as the second step of confronting sin in a brother?

By having a group of two or three people, the truth can be established concerning an incident. The offended brother may have motive to twist the truth to suit their agenda. One or two other trusted individuals should be able to have an unbiased view of the situation and make a sound recommendation to the church.

Matthew 18:17 – “And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”

What is the role of the church in the third step of discipline?

The church should hear the matter and the testimony of the two or three witnesses and then proceed to make a judgment upon the action. If the action is inconsistent with the doctrine of Christ and is an excludable offence based upon the Scriptures, then the church must exercise discipline.

What is the consequence of church discipline upon the excluded member? See also 1 Corinthians 5:11-13.

They are to be treated as an unbeliever. We are not to have deep relationships with them, nor even socialize with them. The bottom line is that we cannot act like nothing has happened. They should feel the result of disfellowship from the church. That doesn’t mean we don’t love them or pray for them. However, we cannot act like everything is the same as it was.

How to Righteously Judge

Now that we’ve discussed when to judge, it is time to discuss how we should judge. Fortunately, the Scriptures give much instruction on the manner in which we are to discern and condemn sin. We will address seven principles that should guide our discernment, regardless of the circumstances.

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Principle #1: Ensure that you **limit yourself to judging the **sin** and not the **sinner****

Ephesians 4:29-30 – “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.”

Ephesians 4:15 – “But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, [even] Christ.”

Principle #2: Get all the **facts before you pass judgment**

Proverbs 18:13 – “He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him.”

Proverbs 18:17 – “He that is first in his own cause seemeth just but his neighbour cometh and searcheth him.”

Principle #3: Remove **unrighteous motivations**

Matthew 7:5 – “Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye.”

Principle # 4: Let **love be your motivation for exercising discernment**

1 Peter 4:8 – “And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.”

Psalms 32:1 – “Blessed [is he whose] transgression [is] forgiven, [whose] sin [is] covered.”

How does love lead to the covering of sin?

By loving our brother and confronting their sin in a godly spirit, we help them to deal with it and find a place of repentance. That allows God to cover their sin.

Principle #5: Have a **humble attitude, recognizing your own **sinful** tendencies**

Galatians 6:1 – “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.”

Principle #6: Let God’s Word be your **standard for judgment**

2 Timothy 3:16-17 – “All scripture [is] given by inspiration of God, and [is] profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

Psalms 119:108 – “Accept, I beseech thee, the freewill offerings of my mouth, O LORD, and teach me thy judgments.”

Principle #7: **Practice makes Perfect**

Hebrews 5:13-14 – “For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”

Our discernment will be known by the pattern of godliness in our life!