

“Do Not Judge”

(Matthew 7:1, 2)

In our study of the Sermon on the Mount, we have come to Matthew 7. This chapter touches on a variety of subjects. As a result, some think the chapter is a collection of unconnected teachings. However, a closer look will show that most of the segments are in keeping with two primary themes. The first of these is how we relate to others as we live in the world, and the second is the importance of obeying the Lord.

One challenge we all face in living the Christian life is relating to other people. We have already had several admonitions in the Sermon on the Mount regarding this subject: Be merciful to others (5:7), be a peacemaker (5:9), be a good influence (5:13–16), and be reconciled with a brother rather than staying angry at him (5:21–24). Christ even taught how to relate to those who would try to hurt us (that is, our enemies) (5:38–48). Now, in 7:1–12, we have an entire section devoted to this important topic.

Six principles may be drawn from these verses—six essentials for getting along with other people. We will just cover the first of these in only two verses in this lesson. Since the first two verses are on judging, I am calling this presentation “Do Not Judge.”¹ We will study the other five points in a lesson titled “Getting Along with Others,” which will be in the next issue.

WHAT JESUS COMMANDED (7:1a)

If we want to get along with others, Jesus said that we must first stop being judgmental. The

passage begins, “Do not judge so that you will not be judged.” In the original text, the form used indicates that His listeners needed to *stop* being judgmental.² Williams’ translation has “Stop criticizing others.”³

Meeting a Universal Need

This seems to be a negative way to start the passage on relationships which closes with the very positive Golden Rule. Jesus may have begun like this for several reasons. He may have commenced with a warning about judging because His listeners needed this admonition. We need this same admonition today. Probably no twenty-four-hour period passes without each of us violating Jesus’ command in Matthew 7:1. Nothing destroys a relationship more quickly than a failure to obey that command.

Offsetting a Bad Influence

Again, Jesus may have begun with the subject of judging because the scribes and the Pharisees were never far from His mind.⁴ According to Luke, they were already following Jesus everywhere He went, trying to find some fault to use in accusing Him (see Luke 6:1–7). According to John, His enemies (including the Pharisees) were already making plans to kill Him (see John 5:18).

The scribes and the Pharisees were guilty of the kind of judgment Jesus was denouncing.

²The word translated “judge” is in the present tense, indicating continuous action.

³Charles B. Williams, *The New Testament: A Translation in the Language of the People* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1949), 23.

⁴In our studies on the Sermon on the Mount, we have already seen some of Jesus’ direct and indirect references to the scribes and the Pharisees.

¹This is a revision of a lesson titled “Judge Not” which appeared in the February 2002 issue of *Truth for Today*.

They condemned large segments of society: tax-collectors (Luke 18:9–14), Samaritans, and Gentiles. Further, they viewed themselves as superior to everyone else. They looked down on others and felt little compassion for them. If we want to get along with others, our righteousness must “surpass . . . that of the scribes and Pharisees” (Matthew 5:20).

Eliminating a Negative Aspect

Jesus may also have started as He did because He desired to eliminate the negative aspect of relationships before getting to the positive. Before we plant flowers, we sometimes have to pull weeds. For whatever reason, this is where Christ started His discussion on getting along with others: “Do not judge so that you will not be judged.”

WHAT JESUS DID NOT MEAN (7:1a)

The worldly-minded and biblically illiterate know a handful of Scripture texts, and this is one of them.⁵ Non-religious people are especially familiar with the KJV phrasing: “Judge not, that ye be not judged.”

I have most often heard these words on the lips of the guilty or those who sympathized with the guilty. These people would interpret the words “Judge not” to mean that we are never to say that anyone else is wrong. They do not believe Christians should warn an individual that dire consequences await sinners who will refuse to repent and change their ways. Is that what Jesus intended to teach? Before noting what the word “judge” *does* mean in Matthew 7:1, let me first stress what it *does not* mean.

Not Against Civil Judgment

Since the Bible does not contradict itself, Jesus’ words do *not* mean that we should do away with civil judgment (that is, judgments of the courts of the land). God gave civil government the right to judge (see 1 Peter 2:13, 14; Titus 3:1; Romans 13:1).

Not Abolishing Church Discipline

I anticipate a response: “Of course, the passage is not concerned with civil judgments. It is

⁵This is true in America. Rephrase this to fit wherever you live.

condemning a congregation or its elders for judging any of its members, for saying that they are wrong and should be disciplined!” Not only do the unchurched feel this way, but some church members do too. A leader of a certain congregation said to me, “We never withdraw fellowship from anyone where I serve. After all, Jesus said, ‘Judge not, that ye be not judged.’”

Again, I say that the Bible does not contradict itself. This being the case, Matthew 7:1 does *not* teach that we should never exercise church discipline. Jesus, who said, “Judge not,” also taught us to exercise church discipline (Matthew 18:15–17). When He sent the Holy Spirit to guide the apostles into all truth (John 16:13), He inspired Paul and others to write powerful passages on the necessity of church discipline (1 Corinthians 5:5, 9; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14, 15; Titus 3:9–11).

Not Condemning Personal Judgment

I anticipate another response: “Maybe the passage isn’t talking about church discipline, but at least it is teaching that, as individual Christians, we do not have the right to say that someone else is wrong morally or doctrinally.” Once more, I emphasize that the Bible does not contradict itself. This being true, Matthew 7:1 does *not* teach that we are never to make judgments regarding other people. In the next lesson, we will study verse 6, which says, “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine. . . .” We cannot obey that command without making a judgment regarding who are “dogs” and who are “pigs.” In a later lesson, we will study Matthew 7:15–20, which warns against false prophets and says that we can know false prophets by the “fruits” of their labors: “You will know them by their fruits” (v. 16a). (In the past, preachers often said, “We’re not judges; we’re fruit-inspectors.”) Many other passages indicate that we are often required to make judgments about others (Romans 16:17; Galatians 1:8, 9; Philippians 3:2; 1 John 4:1).

WHAT JESUS MEANT (7:1a)

We still need to answer the question “What does the word ‘judge’ mean in our text?” The Greek word translated “judge” is κρίνω (*krino*), the word from which we get the English word

“criticize.” We generally think of the word “criticize” in a negative sense—pointing out flaws in another—but the word “criticize” originally meant “to evaluate.” That evaluation can be negative or positive; it can be bad or good; it can be destructive or constructive. Jesus Himself told one group of listeners to “judge with righteous judgment” (John 7:24b).

Matthew 7:1 is not a blanket injunction against making judgments concerning others. God gave us the ability to weigh evidence, to evaluate, and to make judgments. Still, Jesus’ words teach that there is a *certain type* of judging that we must avoid. Let me suggest several aspects of the kind of judgment Jesus condemns.

Biased Judgment

A common shortcoming is to allow our background, prejudices, and preferences to color our judgment. It is difficult to avoid this. I have read that the ancient Greeks sometimes held important trials in the dark so they would be swayed only by the facts. Sociologists say that one reason many are judgmental is that they suffer from low self-esteem. When one has a low opinion of himself, he can either lift himself up or he can pull others down. Many find it easier to pull others down.

Uninformed Judgment

We often judge hastily without having all the facts or knowing all the circumstances. Some of us can take a half-dozen bricks of circumstance and build a high wall of accusation. Often we do not know what really happened. We do not know the truth about the background or motivation of the one accused. We do not have all the facts regarding whether this was the rule or the exception in the accused’s life. Jesus told the multitude to “judge with righteous judgment”; but He first said, “Do not judge according to appearance” (John 7:24).

Impossible Judgment

Often, when we judge others, we are making judgments concerning motivation. Since we are not Jesus, who “knew what was in man” (John 2:25), there is no way we can be sure of another person’s motives. We can say, “He did this or that”; but we cannot say with certainty, “He did this or that *because*. . . .” Paul asked, “For what

person perceives (knows and understands) what passes through a man’s thoughts except the man’s own spirit within him?” (1 Corinthians 2:11a; AB). Nevertheless, words like these are sometimes heard: “She thinks she’s so smart!”; “He really thinks he’s something!”⁶ How frequently each of us makes judgments about the motives of others!

Unsympathetic Judgment

Jesus also condemned putting the worst possible construction on what people do. Instead, we should make an effort to view them in the best way we can. James Moffatt’s translation of 1 Corinthians 13:7 says that love is “always eager to believe the best.” It is true that we can know much about a person from what he does, but sometimes his actions are capable of at least two different interpretations: one good and one bad. When that is the case, which interpretation do we put on what he has done?

Harsh Judgment

As a result of the negative approaches to judgment just listed, we are sometimes harsh, bitter, and hypercritical in our judgments. Instead, we should temper our judgments with mercy and love. Peter said, “Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). Getting along with others is largely a matter of spirit: On the one hand, there is a loving, sympathetic spirit that believes the best and tries to lift up and help. On the other hand, there is a harsh, unsympathetic, judgmental spirit that rejoices in seeing someone “get what he deserves.”

WHAT JESUS PROMISED (7:1b, 2)

The Need for Mercy

After Jesus said, “Do not judge” (v. 1a), He added, “so that you will not be judged” (v. 1b). He then expanded that thought in verse 2: “For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.” To some extent, this is true even on the earth. Life is like a mirror: Often we are treated

⁶Use judgmental expressions with which your listeners can identify.

as we treat others. This may be the emphasis of this part of the sermon in Luke's account:

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. 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 return⁷ (Luke 6:37, 38).

In Luke 6:37b, the LB paraphrase has "Go easy on others; then they will do the same for you."

In context, however, Jesus was especially referring to *God's* judgment. A principle woven into the fabric of the universe is that, sooner or later, we reap what we sow (Galatians 6:7). Haman was hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai (Esther 7:10). Ecclesiastes 10:8a states that "he who digs a pit may fall into it." In particular, Matthew 7:1, 2 is applicable to God's *eternal* judgment (see 7:21–27). Someday each one of us will stand before the Lord and "give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12). In the end, this is the Judgment that matters.

Imagine yourself before the great white throne (Revelation 20:11), being judged the way you have judged others, being measured by the standard by which you have measured others. If you were judged in this fashion, would you go to the right or to the left (Matthew 25:31–33)? Consider these chilling words in the Book of James: "For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy" (James 2:13a).

The Need for Common Sense

Perhaps I should pause to say that, regarding the admonitions found in Matthew 7:1–12, some common sense must be used. Jesus was not saying in verses 1 and 2 that the only factor of divine judgment will be the degree to which we have been judgmental. He was not teaching that if we think everyone is all right regardless of how he lives, God will also say that we are spiritually all right. Even if all we had was the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, we would recognize such an interpretation of 7:1, 2 to be untrue. At the end

⁷Luke 6:38 is a great passage on the blessings of giving. Application can be made regarding giving in general, but in context it especially has reference to the fact that one who "gives" mercy will "receive" mercy.

of the sermon, Jesus said that the one who hears His sayings and *does* them is like a wise man who built his house on a rock (7:24, 25).

The Need for Humility

What *was* Jesus emphasizing? Among other important principles, there is this one: Although we have to make judgments constantly, we are not God. Paul stressed the same truth:

Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls . . . (Romans 14:4).

. . . it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, . . . in fact, I do not even examine myself. . . . [B]ut the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore 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 (1 Corinthians 4:3–5).

John R. W. Stott put it like this: "Jesus does not tell us to cease to be men (by suspending our critical powers which help to distinguish us from animals) but to renounce the presumptuous ambition to be God (by setting ourselves up as judges)."⁸ Since we are not God, all our judgments will of necessity be flawed. In our relationships with others, we must keep in mind that ultimately both we and they will stand before God, and it is God who will make the final judgment. Let us therefore be merciful, kind, and patient in our dealings with others.

CONCLUSION

In Matthew 7:1–12, Jesus first informs us that if we want to get along with people, we must stop being judgmental. In our next lesson, we will draw five additional suggestions from our text. If we want to get along with others . . .

- our first concern must be in making needed changes in our own lives (vv. 3–5).
- our efforts to help others must be characterized by humility and sensitivity (v. 5).
- we must realize that everyone is different—and we must try to learn how to deal with the difficult (v. 6).

⁸John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 177.

- we must rely on God (vv. 7–11).
- we must live by the Golden Rule (v. 12).

We have discussed our relationship with others. Let me close with a few words on our relationship with God. Jesus said that the people who will be saved are those who have believed in Him and been baptized (Mark 16:16), that the ones who will receive the crown of life are those who are faithful to death (Revelation 2:10). Through His inspired apostle, He said that Christians who sin must repent and pray in order to be forgiven (Acts 8:22). These are not my judgments; this is the plain teaching of the Word of God. Your acceptance—or rejection—of these teachings will determine where you spend eternity (Matthew 7:21–23, 24–27). If you need to become a Christian or need to be restored, please do so at once.

Preaching and Teaching Notes

Perhaps I should explain why I think all of Matthew 7:1–12 is on the topic of getting along with others. It is more or less obvious that verses 1 through 6 deal with relationships as they speak of judging and not giving that which is holy to those who cannot appreciate it. However, in verses 7 through 11, Jesus taught concerning prayer. We might think that He had left the subject of relationships, except that the next verse (v. 12) uses the word “therefore” (KJV) and then gives the ultimate instruction on how to get along with others: the Golden Rule. “Therefore” indicates that Jesus was wrapping up His subject—summarizing it, drawing it to a close. In some way, then, verses 7 through 11 must relate to the overall theme of the section. For this reason, we include all of verses 1 through 12 in our discussion.

If you invite people to obey the gospel at the end of this sermon, you may also want to offer to pray with any who stand convicted of having a judgmental spirit.

This lesson and “Getting Along with Others,” the first lesson in the next issue, make up a two-part presentation. I preached this lesson one Sunday morning and the companion lesson that Sunday night. You may prefer to combine material from this lesson and the next into a single presentation.

David Roper

When the World Was Judged

Anticipating His crucifixion, Jesus envisioned it not only as a time of redemption (Jn. 3:16) but also as a time of judgment. He had said earlier that He did not come into the world to condemn it (Jn. 3:17). Nevertheless, since He was the Truth, the Light of God, His coming would automatically judge those who rejected Him (see Jn. 3:17–19).

Malachi prophesied that Jesus would be a witness against all who did evil. Jesus will separate the nations on the final Judgment Day, putting the saved on the right side and the lost the left side (Mt. 25:36–40), but judging people through the cross was to precede the final judgment. Let us ask therefore, “How did the death of Jesus judge the world?”

Obviously, His death brought judgment to our sinfulness. The cross in its deepest meaning would provide a divine sin offering for the redemption of future believers. Jesus died to be the propitiation for all sin (see 1 John 2:2). When we see the cross, we see ourselves as the great sinners that we are. We have two choices: acknowledge what we are and what Jesus did to save us or refuse to see ourselves as lost souls in need of His saving blood. Either the cross will justify us through Jesus’ blood or it will judge us as unworthy of eternal life.

In addition, the cross judged our relationship with God. Those who walked in purity with God would find that the coming of Christ was the end of the Law of Moses and the beginning of the new covenant (see Gal. 3:24). Hearers of the gospel will accept it because God has declared it to be the way that He gives salvation to believers. Although we may not totally understand every aspect of the cross, our belief compels us to accept what God has done.

Furthermore, the cross judged our appreciation of the truth. Jesus came as God’s Truth (Jn. 14:6), but one must have a heart for truth before he receives Jesus, the epitome of divine truth. Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection confronted the world with the key question: “Do you really want the truth?”

We are all headed to the final Day of Judgment, but we must pass through many judgments before the Day that we get our eternal reward. Surely, the highest and most graphic judgment that must precede the Judgment is our confrontation with the cross of Jesus. When we see it in its bright, searching light, we are compelled to decide one way or another regarding Jesus.

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