

Chapter 22: Judging and Being Judged

Matthew 7:1–6

In the previous section, Jesus offered words of tremendous comfort that Christians have drawn upon for the last two thousand years. In this next passage, Jesus abruptly turns to issue words of poignant rebuke that have challenged Christians for the last two thousand years. In Matthew 7:1–6, Jesus declares us to be not only incapable of judging others, but even blind to evaluate the predicament of our own sin. While this passage has been frequently twisted, misused, and abused, we should not miss Jesus' message: *judge your sin, lest you be judged by God.*

Judge Your Sin (Matt. 7:1–2)

Matthew 7:1 may be one of the most popular verses for modern culture: “Judge not, that you be not judged.” A surface-level reading of this verse may seem to confirm some of the deepest held beliefs of our society about radical non-judgmentalism. Nevertheless, there are a variety of reasons to recognize that Jesus does not intend here to condemn all judgment whatsoever. First, Jesus himself regularly judges the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy (Matt. 5:20; 6:2, 5, 16; 15; 23).¹ Second, Jesus makes clear that he does not reserve judgment absolutely for himself alone when he instructs us to “judge with righteous judgment” (John 7:24).² Third, Jesus will later give very explicit instructions for how to work toward gaining back a brother who “sins against you” (Matt. 18:15–20).³ That context suggests that failing to seek to gain one's brother back would be deeply unloving.

Beyond these biblical reasons for rejecting an absolute rejection of judging from Matthew 7:1, we should also recognize that radical non-judgmentalism isn't really a possibility. *Tolerance* was the catchword twenty years ago; however, modern progressives have recognized that tolerance alone isn't satisfying, so that they have moved toward a more over judgmentalism against any who refuse to judge *positively* whatever their movement demands, especially regarding issues surrounding sexuality, such as abortion and the LGBTQIA+ agenda. Commenting on this verse nearly twenty years ago (2005), John Nolland was prescient about the trajectory of society: “In a postmodern context there can be a siren call to a radical pluralism. As popularly understood, the principle is soon set aside when the wrong done by the other person touches a place of deep personal investment.”⁴ In our day, the harshest judges are often those who claimed simply to seek non-judgmental tolerance twenty years ago.

Nevertheless, we do not clear away these mistaken interpretations of Jesus in order to evacuate *all* meaning from his words. Jesus is not condemning all judgment, but he is condemning a certain

¹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 356.

² Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 164.

³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 274.

⁴ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 318.

kind of judgment. Specifically, Jesus “forbids the self-righteous, hypocritical judging which is false and calls down God’s judgment on itself.”⁵ This kind of overscrupulous, judgmental judgment does not seek simply to discern between good and evil, but seeks to develop a categorical evaluation of other people. John Calvin is right to observe that such judgment on our parts necessarily contains undue “curiosity in inquiring into the actions of others.”⁶ That is, the judgment that Jesus criticizes here begins with taking a stance toward someone that seeks to evaluate their lives as though we could understand them in totality. We believe that we can interpret both the actions and motivations of others, when we really don’t know much about either. Accordingly, as D. A. Carson writes, the “disciple who takes it on himself to be the judge of what another does usurps the place of God (Ro 14:10) and therefore becomes answerable to him.”⁷

Thus, Jesus warns us: “For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you” (v. 2). It’s hard to bring into English the rhetorical effort of Jesus’ piling up the words in this verse for *judgment* (...κρίματι κρίνετε κριθήσεσθε; *krimati krinete krinthēsesthe*; “by the *judgment* you *judge* you will be *judged*”) and *measure* (...μέτρῳ μετρεῖτε μετρηθήσεται ὑμῖν; *metrō metreite metrēthēsetai*; “by the *measure* you *measure*, it will be *measured* to you”). Just as we will not be forgiven our own trespasses if we do not forgive others (Matt. 6:12, 14–15), so also if we judge others harshly, God will judge us harshly.

Judge Your Blindness (Matt. 7:3–5)

Additionally, Jesus warns us that our perceptions are not as keen as we think they are: “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye?” (v. 3–4). At one level, Jesus is dealing with the contrast between how we judge others in comparison with how we judge our own sin: “the excessive sagacity, which arises from a defect of charity, when we sift too closely the faults of brethren, and the indulgence by which we defend and cherish our own sins.”⁸ Thus, as Hendriksen writes, “The Lord is here condemning the spirit of censoriousness, judging harshly, self-righteously, without mercy, without love, as also the parallel passage (Luke 6:36, 37) clearly indicates.”⁹

At another level, however, Lenski makes an important point:

In the interpretation of this parabolic language the eye is often overlooked. The splinter is thought to be some small moral fault, and the beam a fault correspondingly greater. But why are splinter and beam placed in the eyes? why not in other parts of the body? Jesus is not speaking of faults or sins in general, one being tiny, the other immense, but of moral perception which is slightly wrong in one man, totally wrong in the other. He who is devoid

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 288.

⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:346.

⁷ Carson, “Matthew,” 219.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:348–49.

⁹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 356–57.

of all truly moral judgment pretends to aid another who is slightly wrong in his judgment. The very idea is farcical—yet men act thus.¹⁰

That is, Jesus is not talking so much about someone's *moral failings* as someone's *moral judgment*. Or, Jesus is not saying that the person who has *sinned* in big ways should not advise those who have sinned in smaller ways (although that may be true); rather, Jesus is inquiring into our moral judgments altogether. The problem with the scribes and Pharisees was less about their sins, and more about their sinful, misguided, misdirected moral judgments (Matt. 5:20; 23). Jesus is criticizing a spirit of sanctimoniousness that utterly misses the mark about true holiness.

If a log in our eye is affecting our moral perceptions, Jesus tells us that we must deal that that log before trying to help others: “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” (v. 5). Lenski carries forward what this means when we understand that Jesus is speaking of moral judgments, rather than moral failings: “Again, the thought is not that one should first correct his own grave faults before he tries to correct his brother’s minor faults, but that one should clear his own eyes and judgment before he tries to lend aid to another in making some correction in his judgment.”¹¹

What Lenski says here is true; however, it is important that we understand how often our moral faults skew our moral perception. Our moral *thinking* is shaped by the desires of our souls. If we desire sin, then our thinking/judgments/perception are warped to rationalize and justify whatever it is that we want. Furthermore, sinning cultivates and stokes our desire for sin, so that the more we sin, the more we will want to sin—and, furthermore, the greater the log will be in our eyes. Thus, we do need to correct our own grave faults before helping a brother to correct his own minor faults, but we need to make these corrections because of the way they affect our judgment. No one would permit an eye surgeon to operate on his eyes if that eye surgeon was wearing a blindfold. In the same way, we cannot rightly advise people morally unless we first align the spiritual vision of our moral judgments according to the perfect clarity of the Word of God.

We should also notice that Jesus isn't *forbidding* us from trying to take the speck out of our brother's eye. As Dale Bruner notes, “Self-criticism can end in actually helping another person get rid of real sawdust! This Sum has often been used as a cover for moral laxity and as an excuse for indifference. But sawdust in the eye hurts and impairs vision; problems in Christians and churches do impede mission. It is legitimate to help others remove specks from their eyes—but helpers must be aware of their own lumber.”¹² Far from wanting to prevent us from helping another remove a speck that impedes his moral vision, Jesus only wants to make sure that we can see rightly when we do so.

Judge Your Tolerance (Matt. 7:6)

The next verse is not building directly off of what has come before: “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you” (v. 6). Nevertheless, commentators like Calvin may overstate the difference when he says that

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 289–90.

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 290.

¹² Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, 1:339.

Matthew here gives us “detached sentences which ought not to be viewed as a continued discourse. The present instruction is not at all connected with what came immediately before, but is entirely separate from it.”¹³ Rather than viewing this verse as “detached” and “entirely separate” from what precedes it, it is better to see that the function of this verse in this location is to “provide a balance over against what could be seen as a too uncritical attitude to the failing of others in vv. 1–5.”¹⁴ The thought in v. 6 is distinct from vv. 1–5, but it is not disconnected.

Here, Jesus warns us not to give holy things to “dogs” or to offer pearls to “pigs.” In both cases, dogs and pigs were unclean animals that symbolized sin that cut someone off from God. While there are many suggestions for how to interpret Jesus’ words, the most straightforward way to understand this is as a warning not to persist in offering holy things (e.g., the gospel) to those who are unworthy in some sense. The real question, then, has to do with what would *classify* someone as a dog or a pig in the imagery of this saying.

Clearly, Jesus is not saying that we should pre-judge certain people as unworthy of the gospel because of certain sins in their lives. If Christ can not only save a “chief of sinners” like Saul, and commission him to become the Apostle Paul (1 Tim. 1:12–16), then we have no right to withhold the gospel from any needy sinner. It is a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit *every* time someone comes to faith in Christ, regardless of how sinful they may have been before their conversion. John Calvin asserts the truth of the matter well: “As the ministers of the Gospel, and those who are called to the office of teaching, cannot distinguish between the children of God and swine, it is their duty to present the doctrine of salvation indiscriminately to all.”¹⁵ Still, some ultimately demonstrate their unworthiness by rejecting the gospel when it is repeatedly presented to them: “The issue here thus focuses on the lack of receptivity rather than on any intrinsic unworthiness of any individuals or group.”¹⁶ William Hendriksen puts this statement in context of the rest of the Gospels:

Christ’s further sayings and also his actions serve as a commentary on Matt. 7:6. How patient he was with Thomas (John 20:24–29) and with Peter (John 21:15–19), but for Herod Antipas, who often had been warned (Mark 6:20) but had disregarded all of these admonitions, Jesus had not a single word (Luke 23:9). He pronounced a curse upon Capernaum, which had failed to take his messages to heart and to apply to itself the lesson taught by his mighty works (Matt. 11:23). He instructed his disciples not to remain too long in those places that would reject their preaching (Matt. 10:14, 15, 23). In the parable of The Barren Fig Tree (Luke 13:6–9) he showed that God’s patience, though prolonged, is not endless. Cf. Prov. 29:1.¹⁷

The forbearance and kindness of God is meant to lead us to repentance, and we must not presume upon it by hard and impenitent hearts (Rom. 2:4–5).

¹³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:349.

¹⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 273.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:349.

¹⁶ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 172.

¹⁷ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 359–60.

Why, then, does Jesus give this warning? John Calvin offers two reasons:

There are two reasons, why Christ forbade that the Gospel should be offered to lost despisers. It is an open profanation of the mysteries of God to expose them to the taunts of wicked men. Another reason is, that Christ intended to comfort his disciples, that they might not cease to bestow their labors on the elect of God in teaching the Gospel, though they saw it wantonly rejected by wicked and ungodly men.¹⁸

We keenly experience the truth of this first reason, since we live in a world that openly taunts and mocks the truth. With sanctimonious, overscrupulous, log-blinded eyes, they persecute Christian truth viciously, despising God's truth as not only false, but as immoral. While we must be ready to give anyone an answer when they ask "for a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet. 3:15), we must be wise about when and how we do this.

The second reason, however, has special importance. Though the world hates the gospel, we must never give up hope of continuing to share the gospel with those who will hear it. This certainly includes those who do not yet believe, but also those who do believe. The gospel may fall upon deaf ears in the world, but the gospel is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16). While we may despair about how little of a hearing the gospel gets in the public square, we should not underestimate the power of the gospel within the church. The world thinks nothing of the church, and yet God says that his church is his kingdom on this earth.

Discussion Questions

1. When Jesus says, "Judge not, that you be not judged," is he saying that we cannot make any moral judgments whatsoever (v. 1)? Why or why not? How do we come to judge sin, while leaving off final judgment of sinners to Christ's future judgment? Where do you struggle with judging other people in the way that Jesus talks about here? How should we respond to Jesus' warning in v. 2?
2. What is the meaning of the "speck" in a neighbor's eye and the "log" in our own eye? What is the significance of the "eye" in this imagery? How does sin affect our moral judgments? Why do we have such a difficult time seeing our own sin? Why do we so easily "notice" the sins of others? What would it mean to "first take the log out of your own eye" in your life (v. 5)? Why is this step critical for personal ministry to others?
3. How does v. 6 connect with vv. 1–5? Who are the "dogs" and the "pigs"? What are the "holy" things and the "pearls"? What is the danger of continuing to bring the holy things of God to those who persistently reject them? How do we know the difference between patience and forbearance, and foolishness and recklessness in our sharing of the gospel? What do you think Jesus intends for you to hear from this statement?

¹⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:350.

4. Why do we struggle so much with censoriousness and judgmentalism? How have cultural trends related to “tolerance” and “affirmation” made Jesus’ words more difficult to interpret and apply? What role does the Church have to declare the truth faithfully in a world that hates the just judgment of God? What role does the Church have to hold out the gospel faithfully? What way do you need to apply Jesus’ words to your life this week?