

The Best-Known Verse of Scripture

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Introduction

If you were to guess the verse of Scripture more people (even those who are not Christians) can quote than any other, which one would it be? Surely, there are many who can quote John 3:16. Many can also recall John 11:35 (“Jesus wept”) when put on the spot to quote a verse. Several would likely be able to get through some of the twenty-third Psalm or the misnamed “Lord’s prayer” (Mat. 6:9–15).

As familiar as the verses mentioned above are, there is one verse that has surely risen above them in familiarity and popularity in recent years, especially since the wonderful days of “political correctness” descended on our nation. Here it is: “Judge not, that ye be not judged” (Mat. 7:1). Those who do not know an apostle from an epistle about the New Testament seem to know this verse well and seem to have it always ready to quote. It seems almost as if many folk think this is the only significant verse in the entire sacred canon. (It is interesting to observe how often those who despise the Word of God are quick to quote it when they think it justifies their behavior.) This verse has also become a favorite of liberals in the church who cannot stand for their rankest heretics to be called what they are – apostates, false teachers, and heretics.

If it is possible to overwork a verse of Holy Writ, I suggest that folk may be getting close to doing it with this one. The problem, however, is really not so much that people **over**use it, but that they **mis**use it. Whatever the meaning of these words is, they are more than a mere suggestion or good advice. These words constitute a strong negative command – a prohibition. It is imperative, therefore, that we understand what Jesus means, as well as what He does not mean in this statement.

Verily, according to the “politically correct” crowd, the worst sin one can commit nowadays is to accuse another person of being a “sinner.” They judge us to be “evil” for judging others as “evil.” In the minds of some, “judging others” is about the **only** behavior that rises (or sinks) to the level of being sinful. Ours is a day of hyper-tolerance in which every sort of behavior (public nudity, homosexual acts, abortion, murder [but I repeat myself]) is excusable and justifiable (as “art,” “freedom of expression,” etc.)—except one: daring to declare such behaviors to be sinful and their perpetrators evil. To do so is to be “insensitive,” “intolerant,” and (perhaps worst of all) “judgmental.”

It never seems to dawn on the folk who thus cry that they constantly condemn themselves. One has to be **extremely** dense not to perceive that he himself is “judging” another when he accuses another person of “judging” others. In other words, one has to engage in judging to judge that another has judged! I suspect that they know this. Those of the liberal mindset (in matters of morality, politics, and religion) have never let consistency or fairness slow them down. All such wear hypocrisy as a badge of honor.

What Jesus Forbids

Jesus makes clear the kind of judgment He forbids. If the anti-judging judges will give attention to His comments that immediately follow the prohibition, they will learn what it is. For one thing, one should reflect on his own behavior before being harshly critical of others, because “For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured unto you” (Mat. 7:2). If the critic is guilty of known sin (the same sin or a worse one in its consequences), he must expect the same sort of criticism of his own misbehavior that he is making of others. The exposure of such unjust and self-righteous judgment is the point of Jesus’ analogy of the log in the eye and the mote in the eye (v. 5).

It is evident, therefore, that Jesus is forbidding the kind of judging that employs a double standard (as a “homemade proverb” has it: “What’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander”). One may do this by holding others to a standard to which he is unwilling to hold himself, as already indicated. One may also do this by accusing a brother (whom one may not like) of sinful behavior, while completely overlooking the same (or worse) behavior in another brother (whom one may like or who may be one’s relative). It seems at times that about the only standard liberals have is the double standard.

Paul supplies an illustration of this principle when he condemns the hypocritical attitude of the Jews toward the Gentiles:

Wherefore thou art without excuse, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest dost practise the same things (Rom. 2:1).

Paul here alludes to the Jews’ self-righteous condemnation of the immoralities of the Gentiles (who did not have Moses’ law), while the Jews (who had the written law, and thus far greater spiritual advantages) practiced the same evil things as the Gentiles did (vv. 17–24). We must ever be careful not to engage in such sinful, double-standard, judging.

We not only “buy and sell” on the same “scales” with our fellowmen, but we also do the same in our relationship with God. If we are unforgiving when others repent of their offenses against us, God will not forgive us (Mat. 6:15). Also, God’s judgment of us is affected by our judgment of others: “For judgment is without mercy to him that hath showed no mercy” (Jam. 2:13a).

What Jesus Does NOT Forbid

The immediate context demonstrates that the Lord Jesus could not have had in mind the absolute prohibition of forming or expressing an opinion about the character of someone else when He taught, “Judge not.” Only six verses below His prohibition, He warns: “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast your pearls before the swine, lest haply they trample them under their feet, and turn and rend you” (Mat. 7:6).

This prohibition is just as strong as the one against judging in verse 1. Surely, all understand that He is speaking figuratively of two-legged “dogs” and “swine” here. The identity of such persons not only allows, but it **requires** the use of our powers of discernment and judgment. Paul’s injunction, “Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the concision” (Phi. 3:2), requires the same judgmental work. Paul’s words are almost an inspired echo of the Lord’s statement a bit later in Matthew 7, but still in the immediate context:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves. By their fruits ye shall know them. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? (Mat. 7:15–16).

Here He **commands** us to make judgments of certain men, and to do so on the basis of what they are doing and/or teaching. One may paraphrase the Lord’s words, *by their fruits ye shall judge them*, and do no violence to His meaning at all.

By considering some remote Biblical contexts we may also be confident that Jesus was not forbidding any and all character/behavior assessment or judging. Those who are so familiar with Matthew 7:1 that they seem always to have it on the tip of the tongue seem totally unaware of Jesus’ balancing command relating to judging: “Judge not according to appearance, but judge righteous judgment” (John 7:24). My **judgment** is that the anti-judging crowd should learn the meaning of this verse and quote it with the same vigor they employ concerning Matthew 7:1.

Further, the Bible records numerous accounts in which God’s most faithful servants made judgments concerning the behavior and character of others and who were not rebuked for doing so. Surely, Jesus was not condemning here what He practiced. He “judged” the Jewish

leaders every time He called them “hypocrites.” He may have even had these men in mind specifically when he warned about the “dogs” and the “swine” (Mat. 7:6). Peter “judged” Simon the sorcerer as one who was “wicked” and “in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity” (Acts 8:22-23). Paul did not hesitate to “judge” Bar-Jesus as “full of all guile and all villainy, thou son of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness” (13:10). The Bible is replete with such accounts of “righteous judgment,” involving both Old and New Testament prophets. It is safe to conclude that these righteous men were judging “righteous judgment” when they judged certain ones to be unrighteousness.

Furthermore, the Lord was not teaching that one must be sinlessly perfect before he can rebuke sin and/or doctrinal error in others. Were this the case, it would be impossible for anyone to reprove or rebuke another, for we all fall short of God’s perfect will (Rom. 3:23). Yet, we are commanded to so judge that we are able to reprove and rebuke others when they go astray (2 Tim 4:2). Neither Peter nor Paul was sinless, but they most certainly judged the behavior of others as sinful. Without question, those who must do the sad work of condemning sinful behavior should do their very best to live above reproach, as did these apostles. Paul states this principle thus: “Brethren, even if a man be overtaken in any trespass, ye who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to thyself, lest thou also be tempted” (Gal. 6:1). Note that he said, “ye who are spiritual,” rather than “ye who are sinlessly perfect.”

Conclusion

While the Lord **does not** forbid all judgment of others in Matthew 7:1-5, he **does** forbid judgment that is hypercritical and is thus usually hypocritical. He is urging upon each of us self-criticism and self-discipline, the need for which never seems to occur to the hypercritic. The chronic fault-finding, self-righteous, censorious judge rarely does any of his sorry work on himself. The Lord is sternly warning us against applying a double standard in our judgments. How much more peace we would see in congregations of the Lord’s people if we would all learn this lesson. The application of Matthew 7:1 by men in general would also produce a far greater atmosphere of peace in society at large.

It would be impossible for any human being to live through even one day without making judgments relating to others. The Lord acknowledges this fact in **commanding** us to “judge righteous judgment.” “Righteous judgment” is judgment that is fair, just, and equal in

application. It is based upon fact and reality, rather than upon mere superficial and apparent elements (“Judge not according to appearance”).

Our nation is seriously threatened by internal moral decay. Those who have abandoned God for secularism and hedonism do not like to be reminded that their behavior is unacceptable to and will be judged by a holy God Who cannot tolerate evil. They are thus doing their best to squelch every outcry of judgment against their evils and abominations. Likewise, those in the church who have abandoned respect for the authority of Scripture and have sold their souls to error do not like to be called into account and to be judged for what they are. Those who love God must not be intimidated. We must continue to **“judge righteous judgment.”**

[**Note:** This MS was originally written as an “Editorial Perspective” for and published in *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, March 2004, of which I was editor at the time.]

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