

“Don’t judge!” is a statement that’s heard fairly often when the issue being discussed is a person’s moral behavior. If the individual in question is acting in a manner that violates a Biblical Absolute, however obvious the discrepancy may be, it is trumped with the “Don’t judge” card and the conversation is supposedly concluded.

If the response is challenged, the person saying that they shouldn’t be judged will say that it says in the Bible you’re not supposed to judge and, whether they know it or not, they’re referring to Matthew 7:

¹ “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ² For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

**³ “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴ How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.
(Matthew 7:1-5 [NIV])**

But here’s the thing: There’s far more content in this passage than what is reflected by the supposed synopsis represented by the statement, “Don’t judge!” If you stop there, then the end result is a situation where there is no distinguishing between right and wrong, justice goes out the window because there is no crime and there is no difference between that which is honorable and that which is criminal.

So, let’s take a look at it from the standpoint of a reporter.

Who is Jesus talking to?
What is He telling them?
How does it apply to you and me?

Who Is Jesus Talking To?

Matthew 7 is part of the Sermon on the Mount which begins in chapter 5. In Matthew 5:1, it says that by this point Jesus was well known and crowds would often gather to hear Him teach (see Matt 4:25). He was a dynamic teacher and that coupled with the fact that He was capable of healing people with incurable diseases made Him a phenomenon that drew large groups of people wherever He went.



The makeup of the crowd was primarily Jewish which can be inferred from the geography of the situation. After Christ was tempted, you see Him frequenting the area around the Sea of Galilee where He selected some of His disciples. In Matthew 4:23, it says that He preached and taught throughout Galilee, although His fame spread as far north as Syria and the Decapolis (a group of 10 cities area south of Galilee and east of the Jordan River [see map]).

The composition of the crowd is significant because in Matthew 9:36, it says that Jesus was filled with compassion when He looked over the crowds because, in addition to the obvious physical needs, He saw a group of people that were spiritually haggard. Matthew Henry in his commentary elaborates on this:

They wanted help for their souls, and had none at hand that was good for any thing. The scribes and Pharisees filled them with vain notions, burthened them with the traditions of the elders, deluded them into many mistakes, while they were not instructed in their duty, nor acquainted with the extent and spiritual nature of the divine law; therefore they fainted; for what spiritual health, and life, and vigour can there be in those souls, that are fed with husks and ashes, instead of the bread of life?

(Matthew Henry Commentary [Matt 9:36])

The Jews that gathered to hear Jesus speak were living in a culture that was constantly reminding them of not being able to live up to the standard of God's Law. The Pharisees were especially adamant and relentless when it came to telling the people that they were way south of the standard that God expected them to live up to. And what made that so heinous was the fact that the Pharisees themselves were hypocrites in that they were unable to live up to the standard that they were using as a basis to condemn others.

What Is Jesus telling them?

When Christ taught, while He taught on a great many things, the centerpiece of His Message was the idea of a new approach to God that was infinitely easier than what man had access to at that time (see Matt 11:30). The Hebrews that Jesus spoke to were aware of a Promise that had been articulated by the prophets centuries earlier, but were unaware of what that Promise would look like. While they were conscious of some specifics, by the time Jesus arrived on the scene, the presence of the Romans coupled with the previous centuries of foreign oppression had most Hebrews looking for a military figure that would overthrow the current government. God had something much bigger in mind.

The Promise of the Messiah provided deliverance from the power of sin and the way in which it governed the lives and destinies of men.

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

³⁴No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

(Jer 31:33-34)

When Jesus taught, He used Old Testament verbiage in order to communicate to the Jews the substance of what He was saying. When He said that His yoke was easy and that you would find rest for your souls in Matthew 11:28-30, the Jews heard Jeremiah 6:16. In that moment, they were processing Christ's platform, not as a poetic collection of words, they heard Jesus stating His being the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy!

This "new covenant" was referenced by Jesus at the Last Supper when He presided over the Passover Ceremony and referred to the cup as the "new covenant in my blood (see Luke 22:20)." What He was saying was that His death and subsequent resurrection would atone for the sins of all mankind and thereby forever eliminate the barrier that would otherwise remain in place – a barrier that was only temporarily removed through the old sacrificial system.

It was in the context of this old system that the Pharisees were forever pointing fingers and accusing their communities of wrongdoing while they were guilty of the very same things. And it was this kind of hypocrisy that Jesus was addressing in Matthew 7. Because while the Pharisees were guilty of hypocrisy

in the way they indicted others for moral infractions that they were guilty of themselves, it wasn't only the Pharisees that needed to hear Christ's counsel. We all need to remember that while we are admonished to graciously confront those who are doing wrong, we need to ensure that our corrections will be credible by not having to veil the fact that we're doing the very thing we're trying to tell someone they shouldn't be doing.

That's the first qualifier: Don't be a hypocrite. The second thing that He is saying is more easily recognizable when you look at way "The Message" renders the same passage:

**Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults— unless, of course, you want the same treatment. That critical spirit has a way of boomeranging. It's easy to see a smudge on your neighbor's face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own. Do you have the nerve to say, 'Let me wash your face for you,' when your own face is distorted by contempt? It's this whole traveling road-show mentality all over again, playing a holier-than-thou part instead of just living your part. Wipe that ugly sneer off your own face, and you might be fit to offer a washcloth to your neighbor.
(Matthew 7:1-5 [The Message])**

In addition to the issue of hypocrisy is the issue of your tone. Eugene Peterson refers to it as a "critical spirit." You see the same thing being addressed in Romans 14:

**¹⁰⁻¹² So where does that leave you when you criticize a brother? And where does that leave you when you condescend to a sister? I'd say it leaves you looking pretty silly—or worse. Eventually, we're all going to end up kneeling side by side in the place of judgment, facing God. Your critical and condescending ways aren't going to improve your position there one bit.
Read it for yourself in Scripture:**

**"As I live and breathe," God says,
"every knee will bow before me; Every tongue will tell the honest truth that I and only I am God."**

**So tend to your knitting. You've got your hands full just taking care of your own life before God.
(Romans 14:10-12 [The Message])**

The bottom line is that we're all going to be evaluated by God Himself and at that point, no one will be revealed as blameless. So for anyone to have an attitude that says, "I've got it all together and the rest of y'all are just trying to catch up!" is neither appropriate let alone accurate.

How Does This Apply to You and Me?

What Jesus was telling His audience applies to you and me as well. Don't be hypocritical and don't be a condescending jerk. Both of those dynamics create tension that distracts from the resolution that needs to be pursued. In addition, they also reflect poorly on the God you supposedly represent (see Matt 5:16; Jn 13:34-35).

But while Jesus is saying to avoid hypocrisy and a foul attitude, He is not saying to refrain from being discerning when it comes to distinguishing the difference between right and wrong.

For example, take Luke 17:3 where it says:

“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.” (Luke 17:3)

In order for your brother’s conduct to register as sin, you have to define it as such. Jesus elaborates on the importance of confronting your brother where his sin is concerned in Matthew 18:15. What’s significant about that text is the fact that it follows the parable of the lost sheep. What’s being communicated here and throughout the Bible is that when you confront someone about something they’ve done wrong, the goal is to encourage them in a way that gets them back on track. Merely condemning their behavior, while that may be necessary, is short of what God wants and expects. Being critical is not necessarily helpful and that’s what Christ is targeting with His comments in Matthew 7. Rebuking someone is ultimately part of a process that is to culminate in that person repenting, avoiding all of the fallout from what their behavior would otherwise have precipitated, and getting on with a morally solid lifestyle. The idea is to help and not harm.

That’s why it’s important to follow the steps the Jesus enumerates in Matthew 18 as far as going to your brother privately first, and then with a couple of witnesses and then finally you bring him before the church. At each step, the intervention that is occurring is done in a way that fosters a positive response.

Some won’t listen and will be antagonistic no matter how gracious you may be. It’s then when you have to determine whether or not your brother is open to the Truth and if not, Matthew 7:6 instructs you to not throw your pearls to swine who can’t appreciate it. That doesn’t mean you give up, you just switch tactics.

You see that illustrated in First Corinthians 5 where the Corinthian church is instructed by Paul to expel a particular believer from the church because of his immoral conduct. It’s not unreasonable to imagine this individual accused the church of being “judgmental,” but this scenario demonstrates the very thing we’re discussing as far as Christ’s instructions in Matthew 7 were never intended to be interpreted as a command to not judge. You have to judge as part of the process that corrects wrong behavior. In First Corinthians 5, the person is being kicked out of the church because of their apparent refusal to cease their immoral conduct. In Second Corinthians 2:5-11, you see Paul counseling the same church to reaffirm their love for a person who’s been recently disciplined. It may very well be the same person that was documented in First Corinthians 5. But regardless, it shows that wrongful behavior is to be identified and the guilty party is to be disciplined, but always with the goal of restoring that person to a place where they’re honoring God and by so doing, avoiding all of the hurt and damage that goes along with bad behavior.

The Bottom Line – Reprove and Improve

Judging a person is both necessary and helpful when done in a truly Biblical way. The difference between the kind of judging that Jesus refers to in Matthew 7 and the judging that culminated in the happy ending in 2 Corinthians 2 is accomplished by avoiding hypocrisy and maintaining a Christ like attitude.

There’s a word that captures the kind of judging that brings about a good result. That result is “reprove.” You see in 2 Timothy 4:2:

Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine. 2 Tim 4:2 [KJV]

Merriam-Webster defines “reprove” as “to scold or correct usually gently or with kindly intent.” So the motivation behind a reproof is to improve the condition of the person you’re talking to.

The definition of, “reprove” is “to scold or correct usually gently or with kindly intent.” It’s significant that you find the word “reprove” throughout Scripture and the liberality with which it is used further reinforces the need to correct and the and the necessary approach in order to ensure that the correction lands in a good place.

Consider another place where the word “reprove” is used in Ephesians 5:11:

And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. (Eph 5:11)

Look at Matthew Henry’s Commentary on this verse:

There are many ways of our being accessory to the sins of others, by commendation, counsel, consent, or concealment. And, if we share with others in their sin, we must expect to share with them in their plagues. Nay, if we thus have fellowship with them, we shall be in the utmost danger of acting as they do ere long. But, rather than have fellowship with them, we must reprove them, implying that if we do not reprove the sins of others we have fellowship with them. We must prudently and in our places witness against the sins of others, and endeavour to convince them of their sinfulness, when we can do it seasonably and pertinently, in our words; but especially by the holiness of our lives, and a religious conversation. Reprove their sins by abounding in the contrary duties.

(Matthew Henry Commentary on Ephesians 5:11)

The first highlighted sentence shows how you actually add to the problem by condemning them, as in the kind of judging we’ve been looking at in Matthew 7. Counseling, consent and concealment can all conceivably fit beneath the heading of “fellowship,” so you don’t want to go there either. You don’t want to have any part of those things that brings somebody down, rather you want to “reprove” them effectively by first off ensuring that our own behavior is devoid of the discrepancy we’re pointing out and then address our audience in a way that makes it clear that our priority is their welfare.

Look at Galatians 6:1:

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. (Gal 6:1 [ESV])

In order to restore somebody, you first need to establish that they need to be restored which inevitably is going to involve telling them that they’re wrong in what they’re doing. It’s not being judgmental, like what Christ elaborated on in Matthew 7, provided you’re not guilty of hypocrisy or an inappropriately critical attitude.

It’s much like seeing a friend yours driving down the road doing 90 in a 35. You call them on their cell phone and you tell them, “Be careful! You’re speeding and somebody might get hurt.” That works! What doesn’t work is when you call them on their cell as you’re speeding past them telling them they shouldn’t speed and you’re going to give them a ticket.

First off, you’re not the one to give them a ticket, which is the dynamic being referred to in James 4:11-12. The fact that you’re actually faster than they are, as you’re telling them they should slow down, is

the hypocrisy piece referred to by Jesus in Matthew 7:4-5. Should your tone of voice be condescending and overly critical, that's the nonsense Paul talks about in Romans 14:10-11.

So don't judge in the context of being hypocritical or posing as the Magistrate that issues the actual ticket. But do embrace those opportunities that God gives you to come alongside someone and help them recognize the error of their ways.

Look at James 5:20:

²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins. (Jas 5:20)

¹¹ Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. ¹² There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor? (Jas 4:11-12)

That's what we're going for: The wellbeing of the person we're correcting, both in a temporary and an eternal sense.

So do judge, as far as exercising your God given responsibility to look out for the welfare of others, but don't judge in a way that comes across as hypocritical and condescending. And remember that your goal is to draw them closer to Christ, not to merely point out the error of their ways. By making that your starting point and your goal, you are then offering a reproof rather than what is perceived as a condemnation and that reflects well both on you and the One you serve.