

## “Judge Not”

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Chuck Swindoll tells the story of a young attorney in a large Texas law firm. The head of this firm is a rather traditional kind of boss who enjoys a unique ritual at Thanksgiving time. On the large walnut table in the boardroom of the office suite he sets out a row of turkeys, one for each member in the firm. Each man, in turn, steps forward and picks up the bird, announcing how grateful he is to work for the firm and how thankful he is for the turkey.

Now the young attorney is single, lives alone, and has absolutely no use for a huge turkey. But because it is expected of him, he takes a turkey every year. One year his close friends in the law office replaced his turkey with one made of paper-maché. They weighted it with lead to make it feel genuine, and wrapped it up like the real thing. On the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, everyone gathered in the boardroom as usual. When it came his turn, the young attorney stepped up, picked up the large package, and announced his gratitude for the job and for the turkey.

Later that afternoon, he sat on the bus going home, the big turkey on his lap, wondering what in the world he would do with it. A little further down the bus line, a rather discouraged-looking man got on and took the vacant seat beside him. The two men began to chat about the upcoming holiday. The lawyer learned that the stranger had spent the entire day job-hunting with no luck, that he had a large family, and that he was wondering what he would do about Thanksgiving tomorrow.

The attorney was struck with a brilliant idea: “This is my day for a good deed. I’ll give him my turkey!”

Then he had second thoughts, “This man is not a freeloader. He’s no bum. It would probably injure his pride for me to give it to him. I’ll sell it to him.”

“How much money do you have?” he asked the man.

“Oh, a couple of dollars and a few cents,” the man said.

“Tell you what. For that, I’ll sell you this turkey,” he said.

“Sold!” The stranger handed over the two dollars and a few coins. He was moved to tears, thrilled to death

that his family would have a turkey for Thanksgiving.

“God bless you,” he said as he got off the bus and waved goodbye. “Have a wonderful Thanksgiving. I’ll never forget you.”

The next Monday when the attorney got to work his friends were dying to know his reaction to the turkey. You cannot imagine their chagrin when he told them what he did with it. Every day that week, those guys went looking in vain for a man who may still think a guy intentionally sold him a fake turkey for his last couple of bucks and some change.

One thing we can be sure about: the man on the bus must have been pretty angry. And I’ll bet he judged that young attorney as a heartless scoundrel. But he didn’t know all the facts, did he? And he didn’t know the attorney’s motives. How often it is that we judge people too quickly. We don’t always have all the right information. Perhaps that’s why Jesus says in Matthew 7:1, **“Do not judge so that you will not be judged.”** What’s ironic, given our propensity to judge, is that I doubt there is a person in this room who is not familiar with those words. This might be the most oft-quoted line in the entire Sermon on the Mount. What’s really funny is that these words are probably quoted more by unbelievers than by followers of Christ.

A local radio talk show host criticizes Bible-believing Christians because they make judgments about what other people believe. He says, “You can’t truly be a Christian and judge whether or not the members of a cult are right or wrong. Jesus said, ‘Judge not, lest you be judged,’ so how can you call yourself a Christian and make judgments about what others believe?”

Or a pastor finds out that one of the leaders in his church is having an affair. He goes to the man and asks if it is true. The man says that it is and feels it is a very positive addition to his life and has no intention of ending the relationship. Later, the pastor brings an elder with him, and together they try to show the man the damage he is causing to his family, to the church, and to this woman. The man still refuses to change his ways, leaves the church, and goes through that community telling everyone that the leaders of that church aren’t real

Christians because they judged him. They had no right to do that because Jesus himself said, "Judge not."

I doubt there is any line in the Bible more familiar and more misunderstood than this one. And so, before we can obey this command, we have to understand what it means. And before we can understand what it means, we have to understand what it does not mean.

### 1. What does Jesus mean by "judge not?"

One of the difficulties is that the word "judge" can have a number of different meanings in the Bible. Sometimes it means to examine something and make an evaluation. At other times it means to condemn. There are those who say that Jesus is forbidding us to make any evaluations at all about other people. I am asked all the time to write recommendations. Sometimes I am asked to evaluate a person's character or fitness for a job or a school. Is it wrong for me to do that in an honest and open way? Is that what Jesus means by judging? Are we to never say this person is right and that person is wrong? Are we to be accepting and tolerant of any and all behavior and beliefs, even in the church?

This can't be what Jesus meant. Take the very context of this statement and you can see that. Look at v. 6, "**Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine...**" How can I obey that command if I don't exercise some form of judgment? Jesus is not talking about dogs and pigs, he's talking about people. It seems that, in his mind, some people are dog-like or pig-like, and I am supposed to discern that and operate accordingly. How do I decide who is dog-like or pig-like if I don't make a judgment about their character?

Look a bit further down the page at v. 15. Jesus says, "**Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.**" I can't beware of false prophets unless I make some kind judgment about them and their message. These are people who come into the church and sound very spiritual. I can't see through their sheepskin unless I exercise a little discernment.

The fact is that Scripture teaches us that there are several arenas in which a kind of judgment is to be exercised. Scripture endorses judgment in connection to the affairs of State. We have courts and judges and juries for that very purpose. Scripture calls the government "**a minister of God to you for good**" (Romans 13:4).

But not only that, Scripture says judgment is to be exercised in the church. In Matthew 18:15-20 Jesus carefully defines a process of seeking to restore a brother

or sister who is in sin. He says, "**If your brother sins, go and reprove him in private...**" If he doesn't listen, we are to take one or two others with us as witnesses. If he still doesn't listen, we are to tell it to the church, and if he won't listen to the church, we are to treat him as an unbeliever.

Paul ran into a situation just like that in the Corinthian church. A man was practicing immorality and the Corinthians had kind of a hang loose attitude about it. I can see some of them saying, "Let's not be too harsh. Jesus told us not to judge." But here is what Paul says to them, "**I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present.**" And then he tells them when they gather together they should "**hand this man over to Satan**" (1 Cor. 5:3-4). Of course, the purpose of that is redemptive. Sin is serious business and sometimes extreme measures are needed for a person to come to their senses. And whenever we do this it's always to be in a spirit of gentleness and humility. It should never be something we take delight in. The whole process should be bathed in tears. That's why in Galatians 6:1-3 Paul says, "**Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.**" The "spiritual" are those who are gentle and humble; they know they could fall into the same sin; they come to restore, not to condemn.

So we see from all this what Jesus could NOT have meant. He did not mean that we are never to evaluate or judge a person or their actions. He did not mean that we are just to be kind of hang loose and tolerant of everyone and everything. "No big deal. To each his own. As long as he doesn't hurt anybody." Jesus wasn't that way, and neither should we be. So what does he mean?

As with anything in Scripture we need to understand this statement in context. This statement is part of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon started back in chapter 5 with the Beatitudes. Remember those? "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." And then Jesus made that key statement, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." He was talking about a righteousness that went beyond an external observance of the law and penetrated to the heart. The Scribes and the Pharisees were impressed with their own ability to keep the law, but inwardly they were filthy. They were what we call self-righteous. And out of that they judged others. They weren't poor in spirit. They didn't mourn over their own or anyone else's sin. They were like religious policeman who ran around writing moral traffic tickets, not because they cared for others, but because they loved how they looked in uniform.

In all of this we can begin to see what Jesus is talking about when he says, "Judge not." He's talking about

a spirit of condemnation that arises out of self-righteousness. It's the opposite of being poor in spirit. It's being proud. It's being hypercritical. It's secretly taking pleasure when we see another person fall. It's writing a person off without understanding all the facts. The word "censorious" comes to mind. That means to be quick or eager to find fault. It's like the people who rate the movies. Imagine what that's like. You sit there and watch a movie with the purpose of rating it (G, PG, R, etc.). Your whole focus is to judge the level junk - swearing, sex and violence. Censorious people are like that. They look for the junk. They watch the lives of those around them like a movie and they rate them. They love finding fault.

Recently I saw this in myself. On two different occasions I was made aware of the salaries of some people in ministry. You should know that this is a subject that people in ministry tend to be a little sensitive about, probably because so many people in ministry are underpaid. Please hear me well - I'm not one of them. But I noticed that in both cases they made considerably more than I do. My immediate reaction was to judge them. I began to think how frivolous they were with money. I began to recount the ways I had seen them overspend. I began to feel rather smug about how much I was suffering for Jesus on my puny salary. I began to suspect that they weren't in it for the ministry but for the money. I began to wonder if I should bring this to the attention of their supervisors, you know, so they could help them get their lives straightened out. It's amazing how quickly and easily my mind went down a trail of judgment and condemnation. And for awhile it felt so good. We really love this business of judging because it makes us look better. We think that by pulling others down we will build ourselves up. This is the kind of thing Jesus is talking about when he says, "Judge not."

The question is, why is this something Jesus is so down on? Why does he treat this like a dangerous tumor that needs to be removed? Jesus gives us several reasons this is such a serious problem.

## 2. Why are we not to judge?

**A. Judgment backfires:** First, Jesus says we shouldn't judge because judgment backfires. He says, "**Do not judge so that you will not be judged**" (implying that we WILL be judged if we judge). Then he goes on and explains in v. 2, "**For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured you.**" What is Jesus talking about here? Some think he's saying other people will judge us as harshly as we judge them. That may be true, but I don't think that's what Jesus is talking about. He's talking about us coming under God's judgment. Remember what he said after the Lord's prayer: "**If you forgive**

**others for their sins, your Heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins**" (Mt. 6:14-15). He's saying that a person who manifests an unforgiving, condemning spirit doesn't know God's forgiveness in his own life. He hasn't experienced it. And so he still stands under God's judgment. A forgiven person is a forgiving person.

With that Jesus encourages us to examine our standard of judgment. In the same way we judge others, we will be judged. When we judge others, what is our attitude? Is it one of forgiveness or condemnation? What is our standard? Is it justice or mercy? If our goal is to condemn, God will condemn us. If our goal is to forgive, God will forgive us.

Agatha Christie wrote a book called *Murder at the Vicarage*. Colonel Protheroe, the magistrate, didn't have much patience with lawbreakers. He said they should all be punished without exception. "Firmness," he said to the Vicar. "That's what is needed nowadays - firmness. Make an example. If you catch someone on the wrong side of the law, let the law punish him. You agree with me, I'm sure." The Vicar replied, "You forget my calling obliges me to respect one quality above all others - the quality of mercy. When my time comes, I should be sorry if the only plea I had was for justice, because it might mean that only justice would be meted out to me."

That's what Jesus says. If our standard is justice, that's all we can expect from God. If our standard is mercy, we will get mercy from God.

**B. Judgment blinds:** The second reason Jesus says not to judge is that we're not very good at it; we are incapable of judging rightly; we don't see things as clearly as we think. Look at vv. 3-5,

**"And why do you look at the speck 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,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly enough to take the speck out of your brother's eye."**

No one can accuse Jesus of not having a sense of humor! This is supposed to be funny. This has been called the "splinter and plank syndrome." Let your imagination work a little bit here. Here is a proud, arrogant man, with a long two-by-four hanging out of his eyeball. He doesn't even know it's there. He strides up to another guy and engages in "splinter inspection." The very least we could say about this guy is that he can't see quite as clearly as he thinks. As a matter of fact, until he deals with his two-by-four he can't see anything.

You see, one of the problems with judging others is that we assume an all-knowing role. We put ourselves in the place of God. The fact is, we will never know the entire story of another person's life. When a person fails to resist temptation and falls into sin, we don't know how much temptation he resisted before he fell. Only God knows. And if we knew we might commend him for his strength rather than criticize him. You might have a low key, easy-going personality. How can you understand the struggle of one born with a temper controlled by a hair trigger? How can we who grew up in a safe and secure neighborhood possibly imagine the harsh realities of life on the street and what it takes to survive there? How can those blessed with loving, wise, godly parents possibly know of the temptations and battles of those raised in dysfunctional homes fractured by brutality and abuse? So, have a heart. You don't know everything about that person. You can't read their motives. You can't be completely objective. That's why in 1 Cor. 4 Paul says **"Don't go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come from God"** (1 Cor. 4:4-5).

**C. Judgment is hypocritical:** The third reason Jesus gives us for not judging is that it's hypocritical. He says, "You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye..." I think Jesus is saying that we pretend to have this great interest in helping others; that we are so distressed at finding the speck in our brother's eye; that we really just want to help them, but the fact is, we're glad to discover it! Our whole attitude is wrong! And that's the two-by-four in our own eye. That's what Jesus meant when he condemned the Pharisees: **"You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel. You focus on the tiniest things in others, but you have neglected the major things in yourself: justice, mercy and faithfulness"** (Mt. 23:23-24).

I love the story of King David. For an entire year he'd been sitting on the fact that he committed adultery and then killed the woman's husband. Finally, God sent the prophet Nathan to him. Nathan came at David indirectly. He said, "Hey David, there's this rich guy with thousands of sheep who took the only little lamb that this poor guy had left. What should we do about it?" David said, "Kill the man!" He didn't know that was a parable of his own life. He didn't see the plank in his own eye. I think sometimes the angrier we are about what someone else has done, the greater chance there is we're sitting on something worse. Judge yourself first; anything else is hypocrisy.

**D. Judgment damages:** Let me give you one last reason for not judging. Because when we do so, we do great damage to a precious member of our family. Notice in vv. 3-5 Jesus uses the term "your brother" three times. That's no mistake. We're talking about brothers and sisters in Christ. We're a family. Hey, don't we all have enough critics to deal with? Don't we have enough people condemning and labeling us? Do we have to get it from our brothers and sisters in Christ as well? I think of a young believer with a tender, fragile conscience, doing his best to figure out what this Christian life is all about. What a demoralizing impact the severe and harsh judgment of an older believer could be on him. How much more he needs a word of encouragement and a pat on the back. This is what Jesus had in mind when he warned us, **"If you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would be better for you to have a heavy millstone tied around your neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea"** (Mt. 18:6).

This past year as I coached Little League baseball I had a 12-year-old boy on my team who had never played baseball before in his life. It was so fun to watch him improve over the course of the year. I loved having him on my team. And yet he probably struck out more than anyone else. He couldn't throw the ball more than about twenty feet. He never quite figured out how to run the bases. What an awful thing if I were to expect from him what I expected from the other boys. What a demoralizing thing if I condemned him for swinging when I told him not to, or standing up when I told him to slide. What damage I could have done to him. And yet, God's people do that all the time to each other.

Judge not. Judge not because the day will come when your judgment will backfire. Judge not because you don't know all the facts. Judge not because you have bigger issues to tend to in your own life. Judge not because in doing so you are damaging precious members of the family of God.

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