

# To Judge or not to Judge that is the question...

by

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What does it mean to judge? Matt 7:1-5 says, “Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at 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,’ 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 to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” (NASB) The gospel of Luke captures this thought in a similar vein in 6:37, which reads: “Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven.” The same word for “judge” is used in both gospels. To understand what Jesus was talking about, we need to understand the word “judge” used in the context of these two verses.

The Greek word for “judge” used in Matthew 7:1-5 and Luke 6:37 is “krinete - κρίνετε” which means “to form and express an unfavorable judgment or opinion as to any person or thing.”<sup>1</sup> An unfavorable judgment is a disapproval expressed by pointing out faults or shortcomings.<sup>2</sup> The Greek word “krinete” also means “to condemn.”<sup>3</sup> “Condemning” someone comes from making a negative assessment of a person or thing. As you can see, judging, in this context, is to make a negative assessment. It is to make a personal judgment (usually negative) by finding fault in someone.

We could paraphrase Matthew 7:1-5, using our definition of “judge” to read like this: Do not judge by finding fault with, and pointing out shortcomings in others, so that you may not be judged *and* have your faults exposed and have your shortcomings pointed out. For just as you judge by finding fault with, and point out the shortcomings in others, you will be judged *and* have your faults exposed, and have your shortcomings pointed out, in

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<sup>1</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Iowa Falls, IA: World Bible Publishers, 1992), 888.

<sup>2</sup> WordNet 3.0, Farlex clipart collection. S.v. "unfavorable judgment."  
<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/unfavorable+judgment>

<sup>3</sup> Verlyn D. Verbrugge, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 318.

accordance with the measure you [use to] deal this out to others, it will be dealt out again to you. (Steve's version, as yet unpublished.)

The judgment in question is not as to whether or not we should question right and wrong. The Bible is very clear on what is right and what is wrong. Instead, the judgment in question regards punishment or condemnation. Verse two makes this clear when it speaks of the measure we use. The measure in question is the level of condemnation, harshness, or punishment that is used. This type of judgment is referring to an unnecessarily harsh and punitive kind of condemnation.

Furthermore, it follows that the plank in one's eye does NOT say we should not correct sinners or Christians who are in the wrong. The first thing we need to do is to get right with God yourself and understand our own sin. Then, and only then, will we be able to see clearly enough to correct our brother correctly. It is impossible to render an evenhanded, constructive criticism if you have not dealt effectively with your own faults and sins. Hence, far from forbidding the correction of a person, the passage emphasizes the value of correction by stressing the importance of doing it sincerely, with humility, integrity, and a right heart.

Verse five also shows that the warning against judging was directed at hypocrites. The language used here is almost identical to how Jesus described hypocrites as those "who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel" (Matthew 23:24, NASB). The hypocrites were defined as people who focused on the minor and on the external. They focus on the speck rather than on the beam. This warning against judging was directed toward hypocrites who judge with wrong motives. The hypocrite does not seek to correct, forgive, restore, and reconcile brothers and sisters to God. Rather, they intentionally seek to injure others for typically self-serving reasons, such as making themselves look better.

The Apostle Paul also taught about judging others. Paul also expects us to make judgments, giving guidelines for judging in his epistles. He informs us that: "**The spiritual man makes judgments about all things**" (1 Corinthians 2:15, NIV). This "judging" is a different word than that used in Matthew and Luke. Paul uses the word "anskrino – ἀνσκρίνω," which means "to investigate." (Interrogate – examine thoroughly) This meaning puts judging in a positive light rather than a negative one. Paul does not blow his whistle, hold up his hand and say, "Stop! No judging allowed!" Instead, he does the exact opposite. He even subjects the revelatory gifts to the spiritual judgment of the church: "**And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment**" (1 Corinthians 14:29, NASB).

Paul specifically requires us to judge in two specific areas: *morality* and *doctrine*. He called upon the Corinthians to pass judgment on a church member living in immorality (1 Corinthians 5:1-5, NASB). Paul's purpose in judging this man was to preserve the church's witness and bring the man to repentance. Next, Paul reminded them of their responsibility to judge sin (see verses 9-11). He concluded by asking, "Do you not judge those who are within the church?" (verse 12, NASB).

It is also essential to understand the difference between **judgment** and **discernment**. The two are not the same. Discernment is the Greek word "aesthesis - αἴσθησις" which is defined as "moral and spiritual insight, perception; discernment." Read Philippians 1:9 and 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22. Discernment is to identify the true nature of a spirit, doctrine, practice, or group; to distinguish truth from error.<sup>4</sup> It is related to wisdom.

Matthew 7:15-16,22-23 (NIV) "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them... Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" Recognizing and calling out a false prophet is not **judging**; it is using **discernment**.

Here is a very good definition of discernment:

"It is the ability to make discriminating judgments, to distinguish between, and recognize the moral implications of, different situations and courses of action. It includes the ability to "weigh up" and assess the moral and spiritual status of individuals, groups, and even movements. Thus, while warning us against judgmentalism, Jesus urges us to be discerning and discriminating, lest we cast our pearls before pigs (Matt. 7:1, 6)."<sup>5</sup>

In this sense, the definition of discernment involves making value judgments between differing claims to help us examine what is right or wrong. Discernment involves us in thinking in a specifically Biblical way about the issues that confront us. The Apostle Paul lists "the ability to distinguish between spirits" among the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:10, NIV), placing this gift of discernment on equal par with tongues, healings, miracles, and prophecy. Let's take a look at an example where both discernment and judgment are in use.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI. 1992, 115

<sup>5</sup> Ferguson, Sinclair. *In Christ Alone: Living the Gospel-Centered Life*. Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2007.

## The parable of the wheat and the weeds: Matthew 13:24-30 (ESV)

<sup>24</sup> He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, <sup>25</sup> but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. <sup>26</sup> So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. <sup>27</sup> And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ <sup>28</sup> He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ <sup>29</sup> But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. <sup>30</sup> Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, “Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”’”

Farmers know when wheat is ripe by the color of the plant. When the wheat turns golden-brown, it is ripe and ready to be picked. All of the grains or cereal crops are this way. Farmers don’t harvest wheat, corn, soybeans, etc., until they have turned the golden-brown color that indicates ripeness. Until that time, the plants are green in color.

According to the parable, a farmer sowed wheat seed in his field, and an enemy came in behind and added weeds (what the NASB and KJV calls tares). But the weed, or tare, was not just any kind of weed. The Greek word used here is: ζιζάνιον – zizanion: which is defined as, “darnel; a plant which resembles wheat in many ways but has hallucinogenic properties and can be fatal if eaten in high doses.”<sup>6</sup> Darnel looks very similar to wheat in size, shape, and color. Due to this similarity, the servants did not notice the darnel as it grew in and amongst the wheat. The darnel blended in with the wheat, growing at the same rate. The darnel would not have been noticeable until the wheat began to ripen and turn brown. As the wheat turned golden-brown, the darnel stayed green and became evident. When the farmers’ servants noticed the darnel and brought it to the farmer’s attention, it was too late to uproot the obnoxious weed. The roots of the darnel would have entangled themselves with the roots of the wheat. If they pulled up the darnel, they would also uproot the wheat. The farmer opted to wait until the harvest to save his crop. As the wheat was harvested, the darnel could easily be removed without damaging the precious crop.

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<sup>6</sup> W E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words: With Topical Index* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1996), 618.



Wheat



Darnel (Tares)

So, what exactly does this parable have to do with judging or discernment? The servants discerned that there was darnel among the wheat. As the wheat ripened and turned brown, they recognized the darnel and discerned that it was a weed. While this may seem rather simplistic, that is exactly what discernment is; the ability to assess and recognize the difference between the good and the bad. The servants exhibited wisdom in going straight to the farmer for advice. They could have been judgmental and started uprooting the darnel, but they did not. Instead, they went to the farmer with the information they had discerned. The farmer told them that it was not yet time to execute judgment on the darnel. The judgment would happen at the harvest, at which point the darnel would be gathered up and destroyed. Here are a couple of points for you to consider.

**Point #1:** Who discerned the weeds? It was the servants working the fields who discerned there was darnel growing amongst the wheat. It is the same with us today. God expects you and I to use discernment when we look at the world around us. This use of discernment is especially true when it concerns the church. God expects us to be able to discern false teachers and prophets. False teachers can look, act, and speak just like a Christian, except their teaching won't line up with the Bible.

**Point #2:** Sometimes discernment takes time. Please understand that while the wheat was green and growing, the darnel would have been very difficult to see and distinguish from



the wheat. This similarity is what makes wolves in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15) so difficult to see. They look just like the sheep, in the same way that the darnel looked just like the wheat. Only by spending time in God's word and meditating on it will we recognize the wolf. If you don't know and aren't familiar with the Bible, you won't know when it's being twisted, manipulated, and being taken out of context.

**Point #3:** What do you do when discernment comes? In the parable, the servants immediately went to the farmer for advice about what they discerned. As Christians, we should go to God in prayer about the things we discern. We know from scripture that there are instances where God expects us to judge what we discern, such as *morality* and *doctrine* issues within the church (1 Corinthians 5:1-5). But when we discern something, and we're not sure whether or not we can judge, we should immediately go to God with our concern. Discernment is good. God wants and expects us to use discernment. It is what we do with that discernment that can get us into trouble. What would have happened if the servants had started pulling up the weeds without consulting with the farmer? They would have destroyed the wheat and ruined the harvest. This is an instance where judging would have had catastrophic results. The servants were wise and first went to the farmer. Are we wise enough to do the same?

**Point #4:** It was the farmer who judged the darnel, not the servants. This is a significant point for us to learn. Most of the time, we want to be the ones who pronounce judgment. Judgment needed to be carried out against the darnel, which was obvious to the servants. However, the farmer in the parable knew that the timing of the judgment was everything.

The wheat was more important than the darnel, so the judgment would have to wait until the harvest. Don't get impatient when you discern evil (or evil people) and want God to judge it (or them) immediately. We don't realize that wheat is more important than weeds in God's eyes. God is focused on the harvest of souls. God will judge at exactly the right time. Our job is to discern the weeds and let God destroy them in the judgment. If we try to judge a person, we are usurping God's authority. Discernment and wisdom go hand in hand. We need wisdom to discern, and we need wisdom to know what to do after we discern. We need to be like the servants in the parable and go to God for advice. Will we?