



# Misapplied Scripture: Matthew 7:1

By Andrew Olson

*“Do not judge so that you will not be judged.” - Matthew 7:1 – NASB*

While the previous “Misapplied Scripture” articles have dealt with verses that are often used out of context by those professing a faith in Christ, this is a verse that is often used by those who have made no such profession, or in some cases they have only very recently made such a profession. Nevertheless, it is a verse that is commonly misapplied, so I wish to address it here.

As with any verse, this one must be taken within its context. Normally I advise, at the very least, to read a verse within the chapter that contains it. In this case, such an approach would be adequate, but not optimal. Chapter seven of Matthew's Gospel comes as the third of three chapters detailing the famous *Sermon on the Mount*<sup>1</sup>. This chapter is especially Gospel-centric.

I'll begin by showing verse one in conjunction with the following verse: *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*** (emphasis mine.)

Verse one doesn't exhort Christians not to judge, but rather to keep their judgments fair, honest, and consistent. Because the Christian understands the Gospel, which at the most basic level states that in order to inherit eternal life one must repent of his sins and trust that the sacrifice made by Jesus our Savior on the cross is sufficient to pay the penalty for sins, it is fair, honest, and consistent to hold others to the standard of the Gospel.

By stating what Jesus did in verses one and two, Jesus was also rebuking the standards of Pharisaical Judaism, which demanded an impossible righteousness from the laity, while the leadership was corrupt to the core. Jesus was rebuking those who imposed a “do what I say, not what I do” standard on others. The apostle Paul clarifies this nicely in Romans 2:1, where he says: *Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; **for you who judge practice the same***

*things* (emphasis mine.)

Not only does Jesus not command us never to judge, looking at the greater context of the New Testament we find that He often *commands* the Christian to make judgments. For example, later in chapter seven, beginning with verse fifteen, Jesus instructs us to beware of false prophets. How are we to beware of false prophets if we are not permitted to judge them false in the first place? He goes on to explain that bad fruit comes from a bad tree. If the fruit of a prophet is unbecoming of a believer in Christ, it is not only safe to judge him false, we are commanded by our Lord to do so.

If Matthew 7:15-20 is not enough to convince the reader, John 7:24 should be. In John's Gospel, Jesus states: *Do not judge according to appearance, **but judge with righteous judgment***<sup>2</sup>(emphasis mine.)

Furthermore, in Luke 12:57, Jesus says: *And why do you not even on your own initiative judge what is right?*

The apostle Paul magnifies the fact that righteous judgment is not forbidden. In 1 Corinthians 6:1-3, he says: *Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? If the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more matters of this life?*

So we see that judgment is not forbidden by scriptures as many non-Christians familiar with Matthew 7:1 would like to believe. Rather, judgment should be done in righteousness. The whole of scripture, among other things, is written to equip the believer to correctly judge right from wrong. Where the scriptures are silent, we as believers should be silent (for example, the scriptures are silent on participation in sports activities, therefore there is no basis to condemn one who enjoys playing (or watching) baseball. However, where the scriptures are

clear, we are to rebuke, reprove, and call others to repentance; and we are to be willing to be held to the same standard we hold others to.

In addition to scriptural arguments regarding judgment, it is also reasonable to appeal to logic. In this case, it is fair to point out to the non-Christian who says that it's wrong to judge that their statement is itself a judgment. It is self-contradictory, logically fallacious.

Supplementary to describing how this verse is misquoted and misapplied, I would like to discuss the primary reason it is misused so often. The scriptures teach that men hate righteousness and love darkness. Exposing the darkness in their lives pricks their consciences, typically evoking wrath. They do not want their deeds to be judged in any way because they love their sin more than they love their own lives, and don't want to be reminded of where their sins will lead them. However, even if we disobey our Lord and remain silent, they are left without excuse. *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.* (Romans 1:18-21)

These people need the Gospel. The kind of rebuke that we Christians would offer each other is offensive to them. To the Christian, proper rebuke and instruction in the Word of God is as precious as fine jewelry, but to those who despise the Word of God, rebuke is received in much the same way as hurled stones. Don't waste your time treating them the way you would a fellow believer. For Jesus said: *"Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces."* (Matthew 7:6) Instead, plant the seed of the Gospel, pray that it take root, and move on to other business.

I'll conclude the way I always do, by exhorting the reader to consider the context of every verse in the Bible. No verse is given in a vacuum. At the very least, read the chapter that the verse is contained in, but ideally read a chapter or two before and a chapter or

two after. Also consider the greater context. Consider Matthew 7:1 in the larger context of the four Gospels at one level, but also the New Testament at another level. In addition, consider the logic of how the verse is being applied. If the statement contradicts itself, as the application of this verse often does, the application must be wrong.

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#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Many scholars believe that Matthew's occupation before becoming a disciple of Jesus, that of a tax collector, required him to write in a form of short-hand that would allow very quick writing, likely meaning that he was able to record what a person was saying word-for-word, as the person spoke. The likelihood that the Sermon on the Mount was recorded exactly as it was spoken in Matthew's Gospel is quite high.

<sup>2</sup> Jesus was responding to those condemning him for healing a man on the Sabbath. He reminded them that the Law allowed men to be circumcised on the Sabbath in order to bring them into compliance with the Mosaic Law (healing them of their legal deficiency), how much more was it right to heal a man of a physical deficiency!