

Is It Wrong for Christians to Judge?

Matthew 7:1-6 -

By Russell Muilenburg

Sunday, 01 August 2010 00:00

Matthew 7:1-6 *Urban Legends: Is It Wrong for Christians to Judge?* **Bizarre** **Judgments**

Se

e if you can tell which of the following lawsuits are real, and which ones are made up:

- In 2000 a furniture store in Austin, TX was sued by a woman after she tripped over a toddler running amok in the store and broke her ankle. The store owners were particularly surprised by the lawsuit, since the misbehaving child the woman tripped over was her own son.

- In 1998 19 year-old man from Los Angeles sued for damages and medical expenses after his neighbor ran his hand over with a Honda Accord. The young man apparently did not notice someone was at the wheel of the car whose hubcap he was trying to steal.

- In 2000 a woman took a Philadelphia restaurant to court after she slipped on a spilled soft drink and broke her tailbone. The soft drink was on the floor because the woman had thrown it at her boyfriend 30 seconds earlier during an argument.

- In 2004 a San Carlos, CA man sued the Escondido Public Library for \$1.5 million after his dog, a 50-pound Labrador mix, was attacked by the library's 12-pound feline mascot, L.C., (also known as Library Cat).

- In 1994, a student at the University of Idaho sued that institution over his fall from a third-floor dorm window. He'd been mooning other students when the window gave way. It was his contention that the University failed to provide a safe environment for students or to properly warn them of the dangers inherent to upper-story windows.

- In 1993 McDonald's was sued by the victim of a car accident. Apparently, the car that struck the plaintiff was driven by a man who had placed a milkshake between his legs, leaned over to reach into his bag of food, and squeezed the milkshake container in the process. When the lid popped off and spilled half the drink in his lap, this driver became so distracted he ran into the plaintiff. The plaintiff was suing McDonald's because he believed the restaurant should have cautioned its customer against eating and driving.

The first three lawsuits are Urban Legends. There are no news reports or court records for those cases. But they have been sent in emails as examples of what's wrong with our world.

The second three, however, are all real. And while none of the plaintiffs in the real cases were actually victorious in their pursuit of justice, all of them managed to work their way at least partway through our court system. (source:

www.snopes.com

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All of the cases illustrate our tendency to be a highly litigious society. They also serve as a good introduction to today's topic: Is it O.K. for Christians to judge?

How To Get Your Non-Bible Reading Friends to Quote Scripture

We're in the midst of a series of sermons called Spiritual Urban Legends. Just like we sometimes get e-mails that prove not to be true; I believe there are ideas in the Christian world that get passed around and believed which—on further inspection—prove to be less than Biblical. My goal in this series is that we will base our faith not on myth—or what “seems true”—but on the solid foundation of Scripture.

And today's myth is one of the most popular ones out there. It is, in fact, one surefire way to get your non-Christian friends and coworkers to quote the Bible. Just use the

s
word. Call something a sin.

Speak out against a lifestyle the Bible forbids. Critique the belief system of a cult or world religion. Criticize any behavior that isn't universally condemned by our culture. And sooner or later someone who doesn't otherwise have much use for the Bible will be quoting it: “Doesn't the Bible say, ‘Do not judge?’” (Osborne, *10 Dumb Things*, p. 71)

In a sense, they'll be right. Matthew 7:1 does in fact record Jesus saying: “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.” But the

idea that Christians are therefore forbidden from making judgments about other's ideas or actions is a myth

. Jesus is not saying that it is wrong for us to make judgments about what is or is not sin. In fact, Jesus made judgments like that all the time. And He expects is followers to do so as well.

What He is doing in Matthew 7 is making some clarifications about what type of judgments Christians should make and how to make them.

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And so, what I'd like to do this morning is take a closer look at Matthew 7 so that we'll understand better what Jesus is, and is not, saying. Then, at the end, I'll offer some Biblical suggestions for how Christians can exercise good judgment.

What Jesus Really Said

So let's begin with what

Jesus is saying

. Jesus IS saying that

we should not have a critical spirit

. Matthew 7, verses 1 and 2:

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.

Jesus is warning us against a hasty, unloving, nit-picking way of looking at others. It is not a good idea for us to be the kind of people who are always looking to find fault with everybody else.

And the reason Jesus tells us not to judge like this is because when we do it, we are inviting the same kind of judgment to be brought against us. "Do not judge, or you too will be judged."

Jesus is giving a variation on the Golden Rule here. (In fact, it is just a few verses later, in verse 12, that Jesus gives the Golden Rule: "Do to others what you would have them do to you.") The idea here is that if we are fault-finders, others will be pleased to find fault with us.

Verse 2 expands the idea: The way we judge will determine how we are judged. If you want to

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take a microscope to somebody else's life, expect the same microscope to be turned on you. The measure we use for others will be the measure used on us. If the yardstick you use to measure other people's behavior is particularly short and rigid, expect to have the same yardstick used to measure you.

And Jesus isn't just talking about how others will regard us. He's talking about how God will judge us. Just like when we pray in the Lord's Prayer "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors"; our attitude towards others sets the precedent for how God deals with us.

That's a sobering thought.

More than that, Jesus IS saying that
we should not be hypocritical

.

Verses 3-5

:

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.

This is one of the funnier things Jesus says in Scripture. It's so familiar to us that it has lost its humor; but it does sound like something out of a Three Stooges movie. Here's a guy with a speck of sawdust in his eye, and here's another with a 2 by 4 stuck to his forehead. And the guy with the plank is trying to help the guy with the speck, only every time he turns around the poor guy with the speck has to duck so he doesn't get hit by the board.

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And Jesus' point is that it doesn't make sense for us to be pointing out the flaws of others when we have our own issues to deal with. That's the very definition of hypocrisy.

Jesus recognizes that we have a tendency to look at people with bifocals. We use the bottom part to see ourselves, and it has a kind of rosy tint. We tend to look past our own shortcomings. But the top part we use to look at others, and it has extra magnification. We're quick to see their flaws.

And Jesus wants us to know that it is a good idea to deal with our own stuff first. Notice, He's not saying it is wrong to help your brother with the speck (I'll talk about that in a bit), just make sure to get the plank out of your eye first.

The plank here doesn't necessarily represent a worse sin, either. It's not like Jesus has a ranking system for sin—and people who have the sin of gluttony are disqualified from passing judgment on people who lie, or whatever. Rather, I think he's talking about the sin of self-righteousness, appointing ourselves as the official speck inspectors of the world.

When I spend my time pointing my finger at your sin, my attention is distracted from my own sins, and that's the real danger of judging. We're all sinners, and we're to work together as believers to overcome our sins. But ultimately, the only sins over which I have control are my own, and those are the ones that should command my greatest attention. That's what Jesus was saying. ***What This Doesn't Mean*** But now, let's consider what **Jesus is NOT saying**. While Jesus is warning us against hypercriticism and hypocrisy, He is not saying that it is wrong for Christians to ever make a judgment about the ideas or actions of others. I'll put it like this :□ **Jesus is NOT saying that it is wrong to call something wrong wrong.**

In fact, Jesus wants and expects us to use discernment about what is good and bad. And when something is bad, He expects us to say so and keep our distance.

And I base that on the very next thing Jesus says.

Verse 6:

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"Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.

This verse is basically saying that we shouldn't waste spiritual treasures on those who have no spiritual interest. We could spend some time debating what that means, and who qualifies as a dog or a pig, but the point I don't want us to miss is that Jesus expects us to make some judgments in figuring who this verse applies to.

Plus, just a few verses later, Jesus says **this:**

15

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.

16

By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?

17

Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

18

A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.

19

Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

20

Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

Sometimes wolves wear sheep's clothing. Sometimes Urban Legends get sold to us as spiritual truth. We have to think. We have to judge what's true from what is false.

Plus, the Bible tells us elsewhere to avoid people who claim to be Christians and yet are immoral or greedy, idolators or slanderers, drunkards or swindlers (1 Cor. 5:11). We are also supposed to keep away from every brother who is idle or does not live according to Biblical teaching (2 Thess. 3:6). How are we supposed to obey these instructions without making judgments of some sort?

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The problem with this myth is that it has taken one line of Jesus' teaching out of context and married it to our culture's fascination with a new definition of tolerance.

It used to be that tolerance meant granting others the freedom to be wrong. It didn't rule out critique and criticism; it just meant that if I disagreed with you I would do so with humility and grace.

But today, tolerance has been redefined as not only allowing others to believe and live in ways that we don't agree with, but also supporting their right to do so and refusing to judge their viewpoints and actions as being either right or wrong. As a result, in many circles criticizing someone else's beliefs or moral choices is considered to be a major social blunder or even downright hateful. (Osborne, p. 73)

The dominant view today is that truth and morality are relative. That is: there is no universal, objective truth that trumps all and thus all ideas about lifestyle and spiritual matters are equal. In a world governed by relativism, Buddha is just as good as Jesus and a life of serial infidelity is just as good as a life of monogamous faithfulness.

And yet, this is an idea that is accepted nowhere else—only in the moral and spiritual realm. Larry Osborne writes:

Imagine an engineering student arguing that his calculations don't matter as long as they work for him. Not many of us would drive over a bridge he designed. Or imagine your doctor giving you a handful of pills and telling you to take whichever ones "feel right."

In every area of life where we can test outcomes, we know that some things work and some don't. Some answers are correct and some aren't. The belief that the spiritual and moral realms operate differently is an unsupported leap in logic. It's a dark journey into an

Alice in Wonderland

world where fanciful and wishful thinking replaces reality and common sense. (p. 74-75)

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Jesus wants us to judge because some beliefs are true and some are false. Some actions are right and some are wrong. And we always need to be distinguishing between them.

If we refuse to call misleading teaching false, to call bad ideas dumb, or to call sinful behavior sin—then we're not following Jesus, we're disagreeing with Him.

Good Judgment

It is a myth that Christians shouldn't judge. We can and we should.

We just need to make sure we are judging the right things in the right way. So as we wrap up, I want to give 4 biblical guidelines about this thing called judging. Here are ways we can exercise "good judgment."

1) Judge only where God has clearly spoken.

If you are going to take a strong stand on an issue—and claim that God is on your side-- then make sure that God has clearly spoken. Some of the harshest arguments in the history of the church have been over preferences rather than Biblical mandate. From disagreements over the mode and method of baptism, to the design of church buildings, to the modern worship music wars—people have vilified and disassociated with each other over things that God has not made at all clear.

The problem with the Pharisees in Jesus' day was that they liked to heap up all sorts of additional rules and traditions over and above the law. They tied up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but then didn't lift a finger to help carry them. (Matt. 23:4) In the same way, we might be tempted to make all sorts of rules about social drinking, cigar smoking, card playing, church time or church clothes that are not clearly spelled out in scripture.

Adding rules, regulations, standards, or anything else we wish God had included in the Bible and then judging others according to our preferences and traditions puts us at odds with God.

Proverbs 30:5-6

gives a clear warning:

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5

"Every word of God is flawless;

he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. ⁶ Do not add to his words,

or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar. **2. Judge Christians differently than**

non-Christians

There is, in fact, a different standard for those who claim Christ than for those who do not. When you join the church you are taking a public stand for the cause of Jesus and you are agreeing to let the body hold you accountable.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth he had to address the issue of a man who was having an affair with his step-mom. The church apparently saw it as a celebration of the freedom we have in Christ. Paul saw it as a stain on the name of Jesus.

He told them in no uncertain terms to kick the man out of the church. He wrote: "I have already passed judgment on the one who did this." (1 Cor. 5:3) Because this man claimed to be a Christian, he needed to be held to a higher standard.

But at the same time, Paul does not expect those who do not know Christ to live as if they did. In the same portion of his letter

he writes

:

12

What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?

13

God will judge those outside.

We should not expect people to clean up their acts before they begin attending church. We shouldn't expect people who don't know the Bible to live as though they did. As the saying goes: "You don't expect the fish to be clean before they get in the boat."

3. Judge for the right reasons.

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If you are going to label a behavior as sinful, or confront someone for doing something wrong, make sure it is to protect and restore that person, not to condemn or marginalize them.

We are all familiar with the rhetoric of the political shows and some of the so-called “religious” shows on TV that tear apart people with whom they disagree with apparent glee and satisfaction over how wrong they are. We should never take delight in the errors of others. Rather, it should be our goal to see them grow and change. We want to help them remove the speck from their eye, not grind it in deeper.

Galatians 6:1-2

says:

1

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.

2

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

Even in the case of the man Paul said should be kicked out of the Corinthian church, Paul's goal was not to write the man off forever, but a hope that he would repent. Paul said: “Hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.” (1 Cor. 5:5)

4. Judge with Grace

Finally, it's important that when we must judge the ideas or actions of someone else, we do it with an abundance of mercy and grace. When our judgments lead us into personal attacks, bitterness, or raging anger—something has gone terribly amiss.

2 Timothy 2

says:

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23

Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.

24

And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.

25

Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth,

26

and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

The goal should never be simply to win an argument or prove our worth. We must be always mindful of the planks in our own eyes as we seek to humbly and gently take a stand for the truth of God.

It is a myth to say that Christians should never judge. We can and should call wrong wrong and take a stand for truth. But an understanding of when and how to make such judgments is an important step toward spiritual maturity.

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