

Do Not Judge

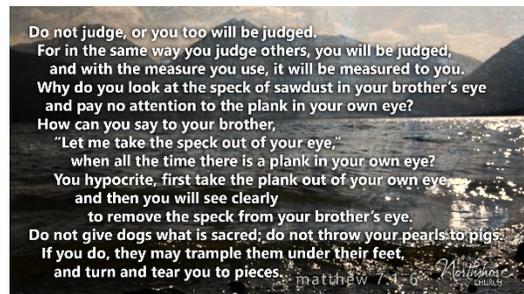
We started this series from these Words of Jesus in the *Sermon on the Mount* at the beginning of the year, and now with chapter 7 before us, we have just this Sunday and next before it is Palm Sunday and Easter... so I intend to wrap up this series with just two sermons in chapter 7, today and next Sunday.



Chapter 7 is really important, as we would expect, since it is often the final words in a sermon that are meant to be most important. Some have even admitted that they might let their mind wander during my sermons... but they work to pay attention at the end, the “so what” that is meant to send us away with something especially important.

With chapter 7, Jesus says “Do not judge.”

I have a couple of approaches when it comes to studying for and writing these messages that are *part of my job* on Sundays. Most of my approaches include reading what others have said about these passages of Scripture. Sometimes I read commentaries and such as a *first step* to help frame my thoughts and aid my study, other times I read what others have to say as a final step, just to be sure that I didn't miss something vitally important, or get something terribly wrong.



When I went to one of my most trusted writers, I found the first thing written was basically, “when Jesus said *do not judge*, of course He didn't mean **do not judge**.” It turns out that many scholars agree, that Jesus could not have meant *do not judge* when He said **do not judge**. Of course Jesus wants us to use our judgement, to make choices, discerning what is right and wrong and such.

But what if Jesus did mean **do not judge**? It seems direct, not nuanced, even in the original language. Would you be surprised to hear that I'm pretty sure Jesus meant what He said? Jesus said *do not judge*; He didn't say *do not discern* or *do not choose* or *do not use judgement* or wisdom. He said **judge**, and that word carries with it ultimate and final authority.

This sense of ultimate and final authority aligns with our understanding of the word *judge*.

If you are at all *nerdy* about news like I am, you know that the Senate is currently embroiled in the process of vetting and confirming our likely next Supreme Court Justice: Judge Neil Gorsuch.



This is a *big deal*, because in our system judges have the final word. And of all judges, Supreme Court Justices have the ultimate, final word. Some based a large part of how they cast their vote for President knowing that the President would have the responsibility to nominate at least one justice, if not several, to the Supreme Court.

The hearings are interesting as Senators grill the nominee. The questions from the Senators, and the answers from Judge Gorsuch, reveal basically two distinctly different schools of thought when it comes to the work of these judges.

1. There are those who view the work of Supreme Court Justices based on the original intent of the law and our Constitution since the *documents* are the standard, and
2. There are those who think that the primary work of the Supreme Court is to seek *justice* since documents like our Constitution should be considered to be a *living documents*, a guide that changes with the times.

Judge Gorsuch is a strict ***constitutionalist***, viewing his work chiefly as applying the original intent of our Constitution. The Senators giving him the toughest questioning, like Senator Dianne Feinstein, believe that Supreme Court Justices should consider the Constitution a *living document*, setting justice as their highest goal. Gorsuch holds a generally conservative view; Feinstein holds a generally liberal view.

I usually choose to be a bit *ambiguous* from the pulpit when it comes to politics (even though I have been accused of being both too liberal and too conservative)... but in this case I am going to tell you which view is right. When it comes to whether a judge should interpret the constitution as an originalist, or as if the constitution is a *living document*, the right answer is clear: neither. Neither view is perfect.

Those who think judges best pursue justice with a living-constitution view point out that times change. So, for example, a *right to bear arms* from the Constitution's perspective could be understood in terms of front-loading muskets. The writers of the Constitution were not thinking about semiautomatic pistols or assault rifles. And when it came to a *right to privacy* or *search and seizure* issues, the writers of the Constitution were not thinking about the Internet or smartphones. So maybe judges ought to do their best to seek justice in our times and within our technological and social contexts. This is where we get the term *activist judge*, when judges define justice where laws and the Constitution are found to be silent, ambiguous, or even wrong.

But one like Judge Gorsuch would say, if you don't like the laws or Constitution, change them... write new laws and amend the Constitution. There is a process. Adjust the documents if needed, and then judges will apply those standards.

Of course one like Diane Feinstein would retort: that is easy to say... not so easy to do. The Constitution is seldom amended and difficult to do (she specifically sites the Equal Rights Amendment)... and it turns out the Congress doesn't even make or change law so easily (as demonstrated Friday as our elected representatives can't agree on the Federal Government's role and responsibility in health care).

Like I said, when it comes to judges, neither of these opposing views is perfect... but I do think one is better. While acknowledging that times and technology change, I'm convinced we are better served by the more conservative constitutionalists because they do not hold *themselves* up as the highest power, but defer to the intended meaning of the law and Constitution. Without such fidelity to our laws and Constitution, judges are unrestrained to view themselves as the highest power... which may suit us just fine while they agree with us.

This illustrates the way I see these first words in Matthew 7. When Jesus said "do not judge," He was also saying that we are not the judge (final authority), there is a Higher Power... only the King is Judge in His Kingdom, only God is the Judge.



It is not merely a matter of what we are not to do (judge), but a matter of who we are not to be (The Judge). We are neither to do judging nor place ourselves in the role of judge.

When we judge, we are not behaving like citizens of God's Kingdom. When we judge, we are removing God as judge and putting someone else in God's place... often ourselves.

The Gospel teaches us what it means to be a citizen of God's Kingdom. We know that we are citizens of God's Kingdom by faith alone, believing Jesus and trusting Him as our King, Judge, and Savior. When we believe, we become citizens of God's Kingdom; we are not judged on **our** record, but rather we are justified based on the spotless record of our Savior. This is the Gospel; thanks be to God!

But when we judge it is evidence that our faith is not in Jesus; when we judge we effectively take Him off the throne of our lives. And if we want to do the judging, if we want to be the final authority in our lives, we are not believing the Gospel and are subject to being judged.

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ²For 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? ⁴How 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? ⁵You 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. ¹

It is interesting that Jesus used our **eyes** in this illustration. I know a lot more about eyes than I care to, since most of what I know I learned in adversity. Many of you know that it was just a few years ago when our youngest son Donny came down with a rare autoimmune disease that resulted in a stroke and blindness (and if you don't know, he is a well today, a genuine miracle who bears the scars of the disease but sees just fine). Through the journey, I came to really understand how eyes work. I'm especially well versed in the retina; I'm sure I could pick out a picture of Donny's retinas in a lineup.

¹ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Mt 7:1–5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Here's one thing I know for sure: our eyes are fragile. That is why they are so very sensitive; we instinctively protect our eyes... and even a little speck of sawdust on our eye is terribly irritating. It is not the sort of thing we easily tolerate; we want it out.

The exaggeration of a plank in our eye, then, is ridiculous... a hyperbole that illustrates the magnitude at which we deceive ourselves when we place ourselves in the judgement seat.

We would err if we read this along the lines of "judge ourselves first, cleaning up our business (even the planks in **our** eyes), then we will be qualified to judge others (getting the specks out of **their** eyes). That is wrong on at least two points:

1. Getting the plank out of our own eye is not a matter of judging ourselves; it is more a matter of preparing ourselves before the Judge, living clean before our Judge as an act of worship.
2. Taking the speck out of someone else's eye is not so much *judgement* as *help*.

The only way you are going to get anywhere near my eye is if you are invited. If somehow you could see a speck in my eye, you cannot just help yourself to pointing it out and doing something about it.

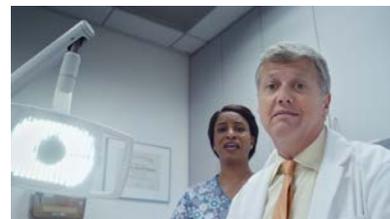
Getting a speck out of someone's eye requires an invitation, consent, and cooperation. Jesus is calling us to help, not merely judge or condemn.

Have you seen those LifeLock commercials that point out how little help it is for someone to merely point out a problem if they are not prepared to fix it.

Here's my favorite.

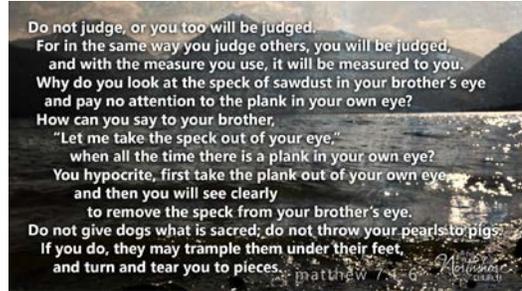
I love it when the assistant says "that's bad."

How many people see our churches or *church people* like that... ever so willing to point out faults, but not prepared to help.



This passage is not about judging, first ourselves and then others... it is about holiness and helping... it is about the way we live our lives and serve others.

Some look to this next verse, and point to it as evidence that Jesus is calling us to be judges after all. Jesus said:



⁶“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 turn and tear you to pieces.”²

First, let's understand the cultural context. In our culture, we generally like dogs and pigs. I know that many of you like dogs because I see what you post on Facebook. Many of us really spoil our dogs; sometimes it seems that we treat our dogs better than our kids or spouses.

I know we like pigs too. The men especially like pigs on the first Saturday morning of the month. Next Saturday at 8:00, there may be some banana pancakes, probably some eggs... but there will certainly be bacon! John Brengan always presents a giant pile of bacon, and there is no reason to think that Saturday will be any different.

But in ancient times, as when the first hearers heard Jesus speak these words, dogs and pigs were despised.

Some read this verse and determine that we are supposed to judge who are the dogs and pigs, and keep the sacred things from them. And if this verse stood alone, that might be a really good interpretation of these words... but they do not stand alone.

What is that which is sacred? What are the pearls? Who is sacred?

May I suggest that what is sacred here is who we allow to be our judge? Who do we choose to be our judge? Should we give that precious privilege to dogs and pigs? Should we hand over the ability to judge us to *anyone*? Anyone other than our God?

If we do, if we allow someone else (even ourselves) to be our judge, then they may trample that privilege under their feet, and turn and tear us into pieces.

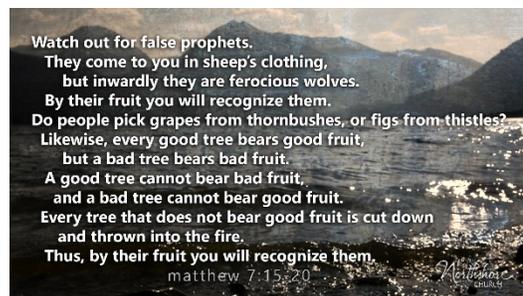
² The New International Version. (2011). (Mt 7:6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Has it ever happened to you? I think it happens to us all. We hand over this precious pear, this sacred responsibility of being our judge to someone and we find ourselves torn into pieces.

When Jesus said, “Do not judge,” He was telling us that we are not the judge, and we should not allow anyone other than God be our judge either. Only God has full and final authority over our lives to judge. (And for those who believe, final judgement is already accomplished... we are judged to be **righteous** because of the Gospel, because Jesus paid the price.)

Further down the page we can read about those who might set themselves up as judge. Jesus said, starting with verse 15:

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. ³



You might be thinking that Jesus is calling us to be judges here, that those who speak on behalf of God, or put themselves in the place of God, should be judged (by us) based on their fruit. Jesus did say that we would be able to recognize the good and bad based on the productivity of their lives, their fruit.

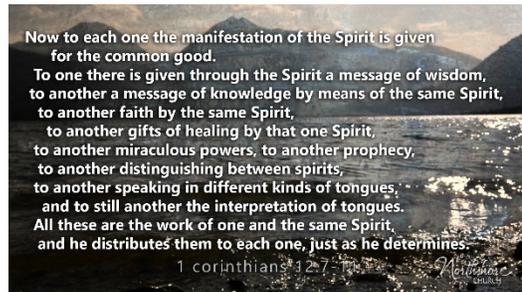
I think there is a subtle difference here. While Jesus is calling on us to use our judgement, He is not calling us to serve as ultimate judge. It seems that what Jesus is calling for here is more along the lines of wisdom and discernment.

Allow me to put it this way. This is the Sermon on the Mount, a vitally important word from Jesus towards the *beginning* of His earthly ministry. Towards the *end* of His earthly ministry, Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, God working in, among, and through us. Throughout the New Testament, that working of the Spirit is described in various ways, often in terms of gifts of the Spirit or even fruit of the Spirit. One of the most direct

³ The New International Version. (2011). (Mt 7:15–20). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

and condensed ways that the gifts of the Spirit are described is in 1 Corinthians chapter 12.

⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸ To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, ¹¹ and to still another the interpretation of tongues. ⁴



We believe in this sort of work of the Holy Spirit in our midst. The way that Jenni led us in prayer at the beginning of the service was an example; she sensed the Spirit's leading to use this prayer that was inspired by the same Spirit years ago. We believe in gifts of faith and healing, prophecy, miracles and tongues. We believe in gifts of wisdom, knowledge, and discernment.

Notice that there is no gift of judgement listed... not here, and not anywhere in the New Testament (in fact it is only Satan that is identified as the accuser). So, if there is one who is judging, we as the Spirit-filled community should correct that one, not accepting judgement. And if we somehow think that we are qualified to ever act as judge, we should allow the Scripture to show us we are wrong about that.

Today is a day to believe, and in a moment I am going to call us all to prayer.

I have a number of things in mind, for these moments reserved for prayer.

First, let's respond to God's Word before us today:



1. Do Not Judge: Others
2. Do Not Judge: Ourselves (1 John 3 – God is greater than our hearts)
3. Do Not Allow Others to Judge
4. Allow God to Heal Scars of Judgement

⁴ The New International Version. (2011). (1 Co 12:7–11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

**These moments for prayer are available for whatever need you bring today;
there are those with faith to pray, so come.**