

Matthew 8:1-6 – “Discernment or Judgmentalism?”

(Pew Bible Page: 812)

Intro: “Whenever Christians say that something is either right or wrong, or whenever they speak out against immoral or destructive behavior in another person, they are frequently told that they are not to judge, meaning that any behavior is right and that any attempt to deny that it is right is itself wrong. In fact, in our postmodern environment, the only acknowledged evil is claiming that someone else is mistaken.”¹ So noted James M. Boice in his commentary on these verses published in 1981. But lest you think that this is a modern misunderstanding, you may be surprised to know that Matthew Henry, writing in the 1600’s commented on this same expositional error. One suspects that some of the people getting on their feet at the end of Jesus’ Sermon probably were saying to one another, “See! I told you! You have no right at all to tell me that I’m wrong and Jesus’ says so!” Is that really what Jesus said? Is He in these verses telling us to abandon any attempt at discernment and correction within the Christian community? Or is something else intended here? Come with me tonight as we delve into this often misinterpreted principle of Scripture and learn that:

Proposition: Discernment is appropriate; but judgementalism is not. As Christians, we must seek to develop proper discernment.

Our study tonight will take three movements: (v.1) Discernment is Appropriate; Judgmentalism is Not; (vv.2-5) Three Reasons Judgmentalism is Inappropriate; (v.6) Proper Discernment Encouraged.

(v.1) Discernment is Appropriate; Judgmentalism is Not – **Matthew 7:1 - 1** “*Judge not, that you be not judged.*” Often Christ’s command in this verse is misinterpreted and understood to be a prohibition against any attempt at moral correction of another individual. This is especially common in our day when imagined “toleration” seems to be the highest social good for maintaining peace on earth and good will toward men. But of course, a moment’s thinking will show that this cannot possibly be what Jesus had in mind. No. What Jesus is speaking of here is not a good-hearted intention to help another individual through godly discernment, but rather “judgmentalism,” and that is a different thing altogether. Let’s begin by thinking for a moment about the difference between discernment and judgmentalism.

- “Discernment” is the making of proper judgments and is a necessary part of life. To fail to be discerning about reality is to invite chaos at best and disaster at worst. A pilot who decides to take off when his plane has empty fuel tanks is undiscerning and courting disaster.
- “Judgmentalism” on the other hand is “what we would call censoriousness, that is, judging the minor faults of other people without acknowledging and correcting our own perhaps even greater failures.”² This is one of our greatest temptations as Christians. Having been saved by grace and instructed in godliness, we too often slip into the habit of thinking of ourselves as morally superior to others, and this means to other Christians, too!

Jesus was not condemning here the use of proper discernment or judgment. Looking down the page to verse 5, we see Jesus Himself making a judgment, calling “hypocrite” anyone who judges another without first judging himself. Again in verse six we find Jesus judging some kinds of people as “dogs” and others as “pigs.” And further down in verse 15 Jesus judged some prophets as false, who come to us as wolves in sheep’s clothing. Far from being judgmentalism, Jesus observations are discernments.

¹ Boice, J. M. (2001). [The Gospel of Matthew](#) (p. 107). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

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So, what Jesus is condemning here is not the use of proper discernment in an effort to help others, it is censoriousness or judgmentalism – condemning others while giving ourselves a pass for the same or worse sins. What Jesus said here was that we are not to use our power of discernment to be judgmental and He strengthened that admonition by saying that in the way that we judge others, we will be subject to the judgement of God. That naturally raises the question, “What kind of judgment by God is Jesus speaking of here?” There are three possibilities:

- The Judgment of Eternal Damnation – This is one possibility, but it must be immediately rejected since Christ has taken our judgment upon Himself at the cross. So, this cannot be the kind of judgment Jesus has in mind.
- The Judgment of Temporal Discipline – The Scripture is plain in its statement of the fact that God sometimes brings His children under chastisement or discipline including physical illness and even early death (cf. 1 Cor. 11:30). This is one of the kinds of judgment Jesus is speaking of, plainly.
- The Judgment Seat of Christ – We are told that when we have finished our time here on earth, each believer will appear before the judgment seat of Christ to receive rewards or to lose rewards for what we have done in the body while serving Christ here on earth. Again, this is not dealing with our eternal destiny. That has been settled at the cross. But we are told that somehow, there will be rewards for our faithfulness, and that we may lose rewards we might have had if we are unfaithful. So these last two types of judgment are what Christ has in view when He said, *“Judge not, that you be not judged.”*

When we fall into the sin of judgmentalism we open ourselves up to judgment by God, but this is far from being a prohibition from helping others through the use of godly discernment.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] Anyone who misinterprets this verse to justify abandonment of discernment needs proper instruction from the Scriptures.

[ILLUSTRATION] It is quite a common thing in our day to hear this verse quoted out of context by people who really have no idea what is being said. A good reply someone has made is to say, “I agree with what that verses says, but I’m not sure it means what you think it means!” Someone has noted that this verse may be the single most misunderstood saying in all of Jesus’ teaching! When we properly understand the Scriptures, we can properly benefit from the Scriptures.

[APPLICATION] If we ourselves are uncertain what is being said here, we will be unable to help others discern Christ’s teaching. Our first act of discernment should be that of properly discerning what God is saying in His Word, and as believers we are accountable to do this. It is somewhat ironic, is it not, that the problem being dealt with in these verses is being told to be quiet by those in the world who don’t understand what Jesus is saying, while at the same time we are warned by Jesus to be silent toward our brothers until we understand who we really are ourselves! Both of these problems are addressed by a proper understanding of Scripture. When we know what Jesus is saying, we can respond to our critics on the outside, while helping our brothers on the inside. It all begins with a proper understanding of Scriptural interpretation, and each of us as believers is accountable learn how to interpret the Scriptures accurately.

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(vv.2-5) Three Reasons Judgmentalism is Inappropriate – In these verses, Jesus pointed to three motives for believers to avoid becoming judgmental.

- (v.2) God will Judge us According to the Measure We use to Judge Others – *“With the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”* What is meant by this? A helpful word comes to us from a surprising source: many of the rabbis in Jesus’ time held that God had two measures by which He judged His people: the measure of Mercy and measure of Justice. The idea is this: Mercy builds up but Justice condemns. This is helpful to us because it speaks to the motive that lies behind our being discerning or judgmental. Is our intent to build up and help the one we are speaking about, or are we secretly enjoying a supposed moral superiority over the person we’re judging? Jesus’ point is that we should make sure we use the measure of Mercy in our judgment of others rather than the measure of Justice if we want God to use the measure of Mercy when it comes to our own case!
- (v.3) Judgmentalism Blinds us to Discernment - **Matthew 7:3 - 3** *“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?”* Why do we see the little faults in others while overlooking the big sins in our own case? Because we are blind, undiscerning when it comes to our own condition.
- (v.4) Judgmentalism Renders us Powerless to Help Others or Ourselves - **Matthew 7:4 - 4** *“Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye?”* Criticism in a judgmental spirit is NEVER received by those on whom it is focused. It is self-canceling. Rather than helping another to get better, more often than not it simply drives them further into self-defensiveness. On the other hand...
- (v.5) Proper Discernment is Called for After we Judge Ourselves - **Matthew 7:5 - 5** *“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.”* Any other way makes us hypocrites: those who say we are one thing, but in reality are something different. Our own sins must first be dealt with before we can help others. But note this well: when our sins have been dealt with, we have an obligation to help others through merciful discernment.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] To be judgmental rather than discerning makes us hypocrites, but to be discerning in our own case makes us useful.

[ILLUSTRATION] I remember seeing a bad movie one time, in which a terrorist took over an airplane on the tarmac in San Francisco. He demanded that the airline send a pilot so he could hijack the plane to some place or other. Eventually, a fellow showed up in a pilot’s uniform and got the plane rolling. But that’s all it did. It just rolled down the runway without ever taking off. Finally, the would be hijacker turned to the “pilot” and ask if he really knew how to fly. The “pilot” knocked him cold, saying, “Never took a lesson. I’m a cop!” He looked like a pilot! But actually he was something else. When we look like someone who is mature, but turn out to be loaded with the same faults or worse than those we are “trying to help,” we’ll never be able to help them reach their destination; we’ll just end up knocking them out cold!

[APPLICATION] We need to face up to our own faults before we can come to the aid of others, and if we don’t, Jesus says we are just plain hypocrites. As “charity begins at home,” so discernment surely begins with ourselves before we can hope to help others. Do you have a regular time of self-examination before the Lord in the light of His Word’s meaning? If not, you’re not ready to step into other’s lives with counsel. We have to face up to our own faults before we can come to the aid of others.

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(v.6) Proper Discernment is Encouraged - **Matthew 7:6 - 6** *“Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.”* There are not a few commentators who feel that this verse shouldn’t be paired with verses 1-5, but in reality it is the logical conclusion to Jesus’ teaching in the first five verses, because our danger is that we might become undiscerning through what we have heard. Having been instructed to *“love your enemies,”* and *“judge not, that you be not judged,”* we might overreact in either of two ways. We might fall silent, thus thinking that we are being merciful, building up our brother, when in fact our silence may be tearing him down. Or, we may speak up relentlessly, not taking into account the type of person we are dealing with. We can always help someone who is open to being instructed; but it is useless and perhaps even dangerous to try to help those who have completely rejected God’s help. How do we know when someone is in that condition? We know because they respond with blasphemy and perhaps even violence when we offer them counsel in Jesus’ name (ex. Acts 13:51). Jesus concluded His teaching on this matter by warning against silence (v.5) and insistence (v.6). We must be discerning, but never judgmental.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] In the matter of discernment, we ought to be *“wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”*

[ILLUSTRATION] When I was in college I had the benefit of having some really wonderful professors. These were men and women who knew their specialties well. They had prepared themselves as educators through years of hard work and practical experience. And I learned a lot from these good people. It wasn’t just that I learned to regurgitate facts on an examination paper. Oh, no. I watched them. I took note of their attitudes, their practices, their whole approach to the craft of education. A good education involves more than simply memorizing facts. You need a role model to show you how to marshal the facts under discernment and turn them into real wisdom. Now in just that same way, as believers we need more than simple facts to turn us into mature believers who are ready to help others grow up in Christ.

[APPLICATION] We need the Word, the Spirit, and godly role models to help us develop this character. This is why you can’t forever do church from your living room couch. We have to be around those who have gone farther than ourselves if we are to develop the maturity and humility necessary to help others. “Lazyboy Church” may be alright for a while, but as soon as we possibly can, we need to come back together in living, face to face fellowship if we are to continue growing in usefulness to the Body of Christ. It’s by being around those who are mature, that we ourselves receive the counsel, instruction and examples necessary to exercise godly discernment.

Conclusion: *“Judge not, that you be not judge,”* far from releasing us from a responsibility to counsel others, calls us to a proper discernment of ourselves so that we can help others. May God help us to properly judge ourselves, so that we can use the measure of Mercy to build others up.