

# The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

## Chapter 29: The Christian and Unlawful Judgment

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Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye (Mt. 7:1-5).

After dealing with the Christian's attitude toward material possessions and anxiety, our Lord changes the subject somewhat abruptly and begins the last major section of His sermon. Scholars, commentators and expositors are divided on how to approach this final section. Many view this chapter as a series of detached exhortations that are really unconnected to each other. Others view these short sections as basically unrelated, yet find a tangential link between verses 1-5 and verse 6 because verse 6 reveals that a godly, righteous judgment of others is still necessary. (In other words, verse 6 is supposed to provide a balance against a misinterpretation of verses 1-5.) Still others attempt to organize these different sections under one particular theme: whether judgment (e.g., D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones), or a Christian's relationships (e.g., our brothers; dogs and pigs; our heavenly Father; all men; false prophets; see John R. W. Stott). Although attempts to find one major theme are tenuous; nevertheless, this section continues to set forth the contrast and essential difference between Christ's disciples and the corrupt religious character of that time.

The first part of chapter seven is a command not to judge. This is perhaps the most misunderstood and misquoted verse by modern Americans in our corrupt, antinomian age. Whenever a Christian raises his voice against adultery, homosexuality or the like he is rebuked by the modernist, humanist or ignorant professing Christian with the words "don't judge." In our day, there are many people who essentially want to abdicate all moral and theological standards and judgments. For them, the only absolute is that there can be no absolutes. Others are extremely judgmental and fanatical in their condemnation of others. They love to point out the faults of others in order to tear them down and exalt themselves. The passage before us will be very relevant in dealing with both of these wicked tendencies. By way of introduction, there are a number of things to note regarding our passage.

First, as with the teaching of the whole sermon, this imperative is directed to believers. We find the word brother, or brother's, used in verses 3, 4 and 5. Thus, the focus of this passage is on the proper conduct of believers toward each other in the Christian community. Church members who judge others in the local congregation unfairly and hypocritically are divisive and cause all sorts of problems. Anyone who has been in the pastorate for any length of time could speak of many examples of people who were very permissive in judging their own faults, yet were extremely uncharitable toward the faults of others. Their own sins were tolerated while minor problems in others were unfairly magnified into major issues of contention. They would

make a mountain out of a molehill. A correct understanding of our passage and application to our lives will help eliminate such ungodly behavior from the church.

Second, it is important to recognize that Jesus is not forbidding all judging, but rather personal judging that is unfair, uncharitable and hypocritical. This assertion is easily proved by the following considerations. (1) In the very next section, believers are required to use their faculties to determine which people are worthy of the titles “dogs” or “swine” (v. 6). Moreover, the sermon contains a whole section which contrasts the false ethics (5:20-42) and religious piety of the scribes and Pharisees with the Savior’s disciples. Believers are also called upon to distinguish between true and false prophets (7:15-20) and Christ repeatedly says that they can be known or judged to be bad by their fruits (7:16, 20). (2) Our Lord judged and condemned His enemies on a number of occasions (e.g., Mt. 15:1ff; 23:1ff), as did John the Baptist (e.g., Mt. 3:7; Lk. 3:7-14), the apostle Paul (Gal. 1:8, 9; Phil. 3:2; 1 Thess. 2:14, 15; 1 Tim. 1:6, 7; Titus 3:2, 10) and John the beloved disciple (1 Jn. 4:1; 2 Jn. 10; 3 Jn. 9). Examining people on the basis of doctrine and behavior and forming judgments about them is one of our God-given faculties and the proper use of it one of our most important duties. Jesus even said to the multitudes, “Do you not judge what is right?” (Lk. 12:57) and to the Jews, “Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment” (Jn. 7:24). “If we do not form judgments as to what is true and false, good and evil, how can we embrace the one and avoid the other?”<sup>1</sup> (3) In Matthew 18, we are told to privately confront a brother that we have witnessed commit a scandalous sin. If he does not repent, then two or three witnesses are to be used and if that doesn’t work, the church session is to get involved. It is obvious from the analogy of Scripture that Jesus’ command was never intended to forbid private evaluation and confrontation or ecclesiastical and civil courts. Paul says that the civil magistrate does not bear the sword in vain (Rom. 13:4) and that churches have a responsibility to pass judgment on cases within their jurisdiction (1 Cor. 5:12). The idea that our Lord is forbidding value judgments, criticism or law courts is contrary to literally hundreds of verses in the Bible. We will see that Christ is only condemning a certain kind of judgment.

(4) There are examples and injunctions in the New Testament that are founded upon the idea that judgment or critical discernment is necessary for our sanctification and for the edification of the church. Paul only admitted people into church membership that he first judged to be faithful (Ac. 16:15). He told Timothy to stop certain persons in the church from teaching false doctrine (1 Tim. 1:3) and said to “reject profane and old wives fables” (1 Tim. 4:7). The apostles ordered Christians to “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness” (Eph. 5:11); to not even eat lunch with a person who claims to be a Christian yet who lives in gross immorality (1 Cor. 5:11); to “withdraw ourselves from a brother who walks disorderly” (2 Thess. 3:6); to “note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them” (Rom. 16:17). Paul told Titus to use sound doctrine “to exhort and convict those who contradict” (Tit. 1:9). Morison writes, “It is right to judge whether or not men around us sin; and to blame them when we cannot avoid the judgment that they have sinned. It is right to sit in judgment on ourselves, and to condemn our own sins.... And if we were without judgment, we would be things, not persons. If we were to live without the exercise of our judgment, we should be at the mercy, not only of every wind of doctrine, but also every wave of passion.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:288.

<sup>2</sup> James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 104.

Third, the historical context of this imperative is the hypocritical, unfair, unjust, censorious nature of the judgments against others made by the scribes and Pharisees. The popular religion in the days of our Redeemer was harsh, negative and cruel. The scribes and Pharisees were narcissistic egotists who gloried in self-righteousness and looked down upon others as ethical scum. When they prayed, they thanked God that they were not like other men (Lk. 18:11-12). They would persecute the church of Christ and were “contrary to all men” (1 Thess. 2:15). “The very fact of having a righteousness that is far better than that of the scribes and Pharisees might lead the disciples into the vicious fault of the scribes and Pharisees who set themselves up as judges over others, gloried in their own false holiness, and despised all others (John 7:49).”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it is a very common sin among all men to praise themselves as good, while they pass a severe judgment on others. One of the main reasons that vices such as gossip and slander are so popular is that people enjoy learning about other’s faults. They overlook their own sins as they revel in and condemn the vices in others.

Fourth, our Lord follows the same pattern in this section as in other sections of this sermon where He states an imperative and then gives reasons and illustrations on why it must be obeyed. Here the command is “judge not” or “do not judge” (*me krinete*). It is a present imperative and thus means that the habit of this kind of judging must cease.

The word “judge” can have different shades of meaning depending on the context. It can refer to an opinion formed after a careful analysis. Paul says, “Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?” (1 Cor. 11:13). It can refer to the judicial process of a civil or ecclesiastical court. “You take Him and judge Him according to your law” (Jn. 18:31; see 1 Cor. 6:4-5). It can even have the sense of judging that results in condemnation. “Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?” (Jn. 7:51). In Romans 14:3-4 it refers to a condemning censorious judgment: “Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. Who are you to judge mother’s servant?” In verse 3 the word “judge” is set in a parallel to “despise.” In our text, it certainly has the meaning of a condemning censorious judgment that is neither fair nor loving.

Fifth, it is extremely important that we understand the meaning of this passage and apply it to ourselves because we live in an anti-theology age where precise definitions, detailed doctrine and dogmatic argumentation are hated. Our modern culture is noted for its pluralism and its attitude of tolerance for all philosophical opinions and ethical norms. This pluralistic, relativistic, non-dogmatic way of thinking has strongly influenced evangelical and Reformed churches. Consequently, the command “judge not” has been twisted into “discern not,” “criticize not” and even “discipline not.” In fact, in our day it is the man who stands on biblical principles and seeks to protect the church from error and heresy that is often condemned. The great warrior against modernism and heresy, J. Gresham Machen, was disdained by Christian liberals (for obvious reasons) and also by many “moderates” and “fundamentalists” because he was supposedly disturbing the peace of the church.

“There have been ages in the history of the Church when men were praised because they stood for their principles at all costs. But that is not so today. Such men today are regarded as being difficult, self-assertive, uncooperative, and so on. The man who is now glorified is the man who can be described as being in ‘the middle of the road’, not at one extreme or the other, a pleasant man, who does not create difficulties and problems because of his views. Life, as we are told, is sufficiently difficult and involved as it is, without our taking a stand on particular

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<sup>3</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 288.

doctrines. That surely is the mentality today, and it is not unfair to say that it is the controlling mentality.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, in Presbyterian denominations which are still regarded as fairly conservative, the men who end up on various standing committees and so forth are often the most non-dogmatic, pluralistic and tolerant of doctrinal deviations. This practice has assured the steady declension of such denominations.

The best way to understand the imperative “do not judge” is to study the immediate context. After the context is examined, we will bring in other passages that deal with this topic and make further application. After the command “judge not,” Jesus deals with three related areas: a reason; an explanation by illustration; and a concluding injunction.

## The Reason Not to Judge

The reason that we are commanded not to judge is that if we judge, we will be judged. Judge not, that you be not judged” (Mt. 7:1). This is intended as a warning. The question this injunction raises is: who is the judge of those who have passed unfair, hypocritical judgment? There are basically two different interpretations. A number of commentators believe that our Lord is teaching that a person who is in the habit of passing a censorious, unfair judgment will receive the same harsh, unfair treatment by others in the community for his actions. People will say, “Treat him as he has treated others.” There is certainly an element of truth in this view, in that judges and politicians who have been noted for their harsh attacks on others receive no mercy when they are caught in hypocrisy. In the recent case of New York Governor Elliot Spitzer (who is known as one who was an especially aggressive prosecutor), virtually everyone wants the book thrown at him for his alleged crimes. If applied to personal relationships it would be similar to the modern proverb, “People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.” Consequently, “what is forbidden here is the sort of fault-finding mentality and speech which is likely to rebound against the one who exercises it (Jas. 2:13; 4:11-12; 5:9).”<sup>5</sup> In other words, “He who, like Ishmael, has his hand, his tongue, *against every man*, shall, like him, have *every man’s* hand and tongue *against him* (Gen. xvi.12); and no mercy shall be shown to the reputation of those that show no mercy to the reputations of others.”<sup>6</sup> A person who is a self-righteous jerk will be quickly and strongly condemned when he falls.

Another possible interpretation is that the person who is harsh and unmerciful in his judging of others will receive similar treatment by God. In favor of this view are the following considerations. (1) The verb “be judged” (*krihete*) is a punctiliar aorist which points to an eschatological judgment. If the judgment of men was in view it is likely that a present tense would have been used. (2) The parallel passage in Luke, in its context, clearly has the judgment of God in view. “Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give and it will be given to you” (6:37-38). (3) Paul apparently had this passage in mind when he wrote, “Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things” (Rom. 2:1).

(4) The scribes and Pharisees were guilty of a hypocritical, unfair judgment of others all the time, yet were held in high regard by most of the people. The judgment they did receive in A. D. 67-70 and in the life beyond came from God. Further, there have been many very godly

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<sup>4</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 2:161-162.

<sup>5</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 274.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:87.

Christians down through the ages who did not judge others unfairly, hypocritically or harshly, yet who themselves received treatment that was totally unfair and hypocritical. In fact, we are promised that all who desire to lead holy lives as Christians will receive persecution (2 Tim. 3:12). The Lord Jesus Himself was constantly judged unfairly, even though He was the most godly, kind and compassionate person who ever lived. Moreover, Paul, who perhaps was the best example of a believer who did not have a hypocritical, censorious spirit, was repeatedly defamed even after blessing his enemies and was regarded as the filth of this world (1 Cor. 4:12, 13). Therefore, if this statement is only applied to men and not to God, it, at best, is only a very general observation that applies only some of the time. If true, this would seem to be out of accord with the other strong contrasts of the sermon.

(5) Professing Christians who are very serious about their personal holiness and daily walk with God are not very concerned about what others think of them, but are very concerned about what God thinks. This warning would be much more effective upon the thinking of believers if they understood that their harsh, censorious judgment of others sets the standard of God's evaluation of their own faults. Paul certainly was focused on the judgment seat of Christ and not on the opinions of others. "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself...But He who judges me is the Lord" (1 Cor. 4:3, 4). Moreover, the believer who is guilty of unjust, unduly harsh or hypocritical judgment who is genuinely concerned with his own sanctification would welcome a sharp rebuke for such ungodly behavior. "Rebuke a wise man, and he will love you" (Pr. 9:8). "Let the righteous strike me; it shall be a kindness. And let him rebuke me; it shall be as excellent oil; let my head not refuse it" (Ps. 141:5).

The fact that the judgment of God is in view raises a few important questions. First, how are we to view this judgment in light of the many passages that speak of our justification by faith alone? Did not Jesus say, "He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life" (Jn. 5:24)? Did not Paul promise us that, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1)? These passages should not be misconstrued to teach that believers are not scrutinized or judged by God in any way, for they are speaking about judgment leading to condemnation and eternal punishment. Obviously, genuine Christians can never be judged in this way because Jesus endured the full penalty for their sin on the bloody cross.

Since our Lord is speaking to believers and is warning them about being judged a certain way by God, there must be judgments of God that are endured by Christians. The Bible speaks of two different kinds of judgments that we endure as disciples. (1) There are chastisements that we endure during life for serious sins. There are many examples of God punishing His own dear children in the Bible. There was Moses who was forbidden to enter the promised land because he struck the rock when God told him to speak to it. David was severely punished for his adultery and murder (2 Sam. 12:7-12). There were church members at Corinth who became sick and even some who died because of their unbiblical behavior at the Lord's supper (1 Cor. 11:27-32). The author of Hebrews speaks specifically to the issue of temporal judgments in chapter 12: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives" (vs. 5-6; cf. Pr. 3:11-12). God's chastisement of His children is not because He is harsh or heartless, but because He loves His people and is concerned for their welfare. Heavenly discipline is part of our instruction in the school of holiness. We must live our lives with the knowledge that we are

always being watched by God. If we fall into scandalous sin we should expect chastisement from God's loving hand.

(2) The Bible also speaks very clearly about a judgment for all believers on the day that Christ returns. Paul warns Christians not to condemn their brothers: "For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ" (Rom. 14:10). He is more specific about this judgment in 1 Corinthians 3:13: "Each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is." In 2 Corinthians, the apostle makes it clear that even our bad deeds will be evaluated on that day: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (5:10). "The judgment pronounced is not a declaration of doom, but *an assessment of worth*, with the assignment of rewards to those who because of their faithfulness deserve them, and the *loss* or withholding of rewards in the case of those who do not deserve them."<sup>7</sup> This is not a judicial punishment of sin, but rather an evaluation of the Christian life. Paul makes it very clear that every believer's works are built upon the one foundation that has been laid—Jesus Christ and His redemptive work (1 Cor. 3:11). The Savior will determine the Christian's place in the everlasting kingdom of heaven. This is an encouragement and comfort to those who are faithful and suffer for their faith. "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. 'Yes,' says the Spirit. 'That they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them'" (Rev. 14:13).

Second, how are we to view this judgment in light of the fact that God's judgment is contrasted with the unjust, unfair, hypocritical and harsh judgment of men? This point is crucial because this passage is often completely misunderstood. People argue that if we are very generous when dealing with other people's scandalous sins, then God will be very lenient in His judgment of us. This interpretation is used as a platform for antinomianism in the church and the virtual elimination of any real church discipline. People have used this passage as a reason to take serious sin lightly and to unfairly judge those who believe that scandalous sin deserves some sort of censure from the church. Moreover, if we compare this passage with others that speak of God's judgment, it is obvious that God can never be guilty of judgment that is hypocritical, unfair or unduly harsh. Paul assures us that "the judgment of God is according to truth" (Rom. 2:2) and that "there is no partiality with God" (Rom. 2:11). God's judgment will be just in every respect and thus is called "the righteous judgment of God" (Rom. 2:5; 2 Thess. 1:5). Throughout the Scriptures we are told that God will judge us according to our works (Pr. 24:12; Mt. 16:27; 2 Cor. 11:15; 2 Tim. 4:14; Rev. 20:12-13). In other words, each deed will receive the due recompense of reward. Consequently, when believers judge others they are to judge not according to appearance, but with righteous judgment (Jn. 7:24). Because of God's righteous nature and character, His judgments of *necessity* must be absolutely just and righteous. That is simply the way God is.

Given these considerations, when our passage says that "with what judgment you judge, you will be judged and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" it means that the standard of judgment that we use against other Christians will have an effect upon how God judges us. In essence Jesus is saying, "Beware of forming wrong judgments of your brethren and fellow men, especially hasty and unmerciful ones, for all your judgments are to be reviewed in the searching light of God's throne, and by those judgments you are yourselves to be then judged. Not that the judgments we form of each other are to be the sole test by which our

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<sup>7</sup> Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 182.

profession will be weighed and our character tried, but that this will be one of the tests.”<sup>8</sup> Since God’s judgments can never be unfair or unduly harsh, Jesus is teaching that our unfair, censorious judgment of other believers will receive a strong, corresponding judgment by God.

As followers of Christ we need to be very careful in our assessment and judgment of others, for if we are unjust, hypocritical, unduly harsh or unfair in our judgment of others we will be chastised by God for such ungodly behavior. Jesus is warning us that a judgment of other believers is a very serious matter that can have very serious consequences. What James says of teachers can be applied to judges: “‘Be not many’ judges, ‘knowing that ye shall receive the greater condemnation’ [Jas. 3:1], or rather, the severer judgment.”<sup>9</sup> Paul appealed to this principle when he said, “For in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things” (Rom. 2:1).

## An Explanation by Illustration

After giving the reason why unlawful judging is a serious matter, Jesus supports His reason with a little parable demonstrating the absurdity and hypocrisy of an unlawful condemnation toward others. “And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye” (Mt. 7:3-4).

The imagery presented here is so absurd it is perhaps intended to be somewhat amusing. There are two men who are probably working in a carpenter’s workshop. Both have problems relating to their eyes or vision. One man has a “speck” in his eye. The Greek word here (*karthos*) can refer to a small speck of anything. In this context, it likely refers to a chip of wood or to a speck of sawdust. The other man has a plank in his eye. The Greek word used here (*dokos*) can be translated as “beam” (KJV), “log” (RSV, NASB) or “plank” (NKJV, NIV). The man with this large plank of wood stuck in his eye believes that his sight is clear enough to go to the rescue of the man with a little speck of sawdust in his eye. This man, who is completely incapable of seeing, analyzing or helping his brother, believes that he is in a superior position. He doesn’t realize his own blindness; that his problem is far greater than that of his brother and that it is inappropriate for him to draw attention to his brother’s problem. In other words, it is wrong for him to judge his brother because he is incapable of doing so and he has greater issues of his own to deal with.

This passage teaches us a number of important things. First, the analogy of the beam and the speck demonstrates that there are different degrees of sin. As our Lord says in another place, some sins are like camels, others are comparable to gnats (Mt. 23:24). The point, however, is not intended for us to make light of small sins, for they are still sins and offensive to God.

Second, there are professing Christians involved in serious sin who either are completely unaware of it or who make excuses for it and push it out of their consciousness. It is a very dangerous thing when people who profess Christ are under the dominion of some serious sin, yet act as if their lives are totally normal. The backslider most in danger of total apostasy is the one with the beam in his eye; but, he seems to be blind to his spiritual condition. People who do not honestly examine themselves in light of Scripture will not repent and will not be able to help others.

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<sup>8</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 270.

<sup>9</sup> John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:291.

Third, there are many people who have a tendency to judge others much more harshly than themselves. The person who has serious defects in his own character, yet who loves to point out smaller faults in others, is a problem in the church and a terrible witness before the world. The children of the devil love to point out the hypocrisy of Christians. “It is common for those who are the most sinful themselves, and least sensible of it, to be the most forward and free in judging and censuring others.”<sup>10</sup> The same people who cheated widows, refused to care for their aged parents, exploited worshippers at the Temple and condemned the Lord of glory were quick to condemn the apostles for eating with unwashed hands (Mt. 15:1ff.). If we do not want to end up like the scribes and Pharisees, then we need to learn to view our own sins as more heinous than the same sins in others. We need to be stricter and harder on our own behavior than the behavior of others. A person that overlooks his own sins, while at the same time condemning minor faults in others, is a blatant hypocrite. This is the primary form of unlawful judging condemned in our Lord’s illustration. We need to pay close attention to Christ’s teaching because of the corruption of sin that remains in us. This element of hypocritical judging is common among professing Christians because we are all Pharisees by nature. We are all too quick to come to a negative judgment about a brother, while making all sorts of excuses for our own sins. Therefore, let us bow the knee to Jesus’ instructions on unlawful judgment and watch against it in our hearts every day.

Fourth, the use of the term “speck” indicates that the professing Christian with the beam in his eye is guilty of focusing his attention on the smaller faults of others. He is an uncharitable, unmerciful person who delights in pointing out minor defects in other believers. This is a common problem in many churches and results in discord and factionalism. It is important to note that the Bible makes a distinction between scandalous sins and the minor rubs and offenses that are a part of everyday life. These minor offenses are often best simply covered over in love and forgotten. The person who is looking for such faults will find them. The one who obsesses over them and gossips about them to others will cause pain and unnecessary conflict in the body of Christ. If we are focusing our unfriendly gaze upon the tiniest faults of others, then we are guilty of not loving our brothers. This is Pharisaical judging. It is the kind of judging that God hates and will judge. This is something of which we must carefully guard against in our own behavior.

## A Concluding Injunction

As our Lord draws this illustration to its climax, He says that the remedy for unlawful judgment is to first repent and deal with our own sin, so that we are in a spiritual condition to properly and sincerely come to the aid of an erring brother. “First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Mt. 7:5). Jesus did not merely condemn the wicked habit of unlawful judging, but also gave us instructions on what must be done if we are going to judge others. This teaching proves that Christ was not forbidding all judging, but only hypocritical, unfair, censorious judging.

Our Lord’s injunction raises the question: why must this plank be removed and what does this involve? The answer to this question involves a number of elements.

First, the person with the log in his eye cannot see properly to deal with the speck in his brother’s eye. Jesus says the log must be removed to see clearly. A man who is nearly blind

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:88.

cannot be an eye specialist. Sin and hypocrisy cloud one's judgment. The man who is a hypocrite lacks the spiritual perception necessary to work spiritual surgery upon his neighbor. By their behavior and thinking, hypocritical judges demonstrate that they are not really concerned about the sanctification or welfare of the brother they are condemning. The scribes and Pharisees were blinded by their hypocrisy and used judging others as a means of self-exaltation. They took great pleasure in dragging others down.

Consequently, it is rather ironic that the person with the log in his eye needs to look at himself before he can observe others. We must never judge our brother without first carefully noting our own spiritual condition. Backsliders make very careless eye surgeons. If we are going to judge anyone, we need to objectively examine our hearts and lives in light of God's infallible Word. If we see inconsistencies in our lives, we must not make excuses for them or attempt to explain them away but must repent of them at once and confess them to God. It should be a part of our daily prayer life to ask God to reveal to us areas of behavior that are contrary to Scripture, especially areas in which we may be living in self-deception. Most Christians who make unlawful judgments are not aware of their gross hypocrisy before God. They need God to open their eyes. Clear vision is needed to operate on the speck in our brother's eye and only the Holy Spirit can enable us to see the beam in our eye so that we can remove it. Physician, heal thyself. The next time you decide to speak to a brother about his sin, first take a good, long, hard look at yourself.

Second, when the hypocrite judges the good of the other person is not the true motive. Much judgment today is nothing more than hatred or revenge disguised behind a mask of piety and concern. Thus, the log must be removed because correction must flow from Christian love. If a person does not have a genuine desire to really help a brother, while protecting his reputation as much as possible (cf. Mt. 18:15ff.), then he is *unqualified* to judge. Tragically, when a professing Christian unlawfully judges a brother he usually spreads the matter abroad in an attempt to damage his reputation. Such behavior is truly despicable. If we really love someone as a Christian brother, then our real desire would be to speak to him privately and help him remove that sin out of his life. Once we remove the beam out of our own eye, then we will *not* act as an adversary who is out to exact personal retribution. Instead, we will come to our brother as a compassionate physician. Paul says that we are to overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21) and that we are to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).

When our hearts are not right before God and we are set upon revenge, we may speak the truth; but, we often do so in a manner that is unnecessarily harsh and cutting. Such behavior may indeed make matters worse. But if we can take the beam out of our eye, examine our heart and true motive, and put our heart in the right place, then our whole approach to our brother will change. We are able to perform gentle eye surgery with a scalpel instead of butchering our brother with a hatchet. It is crucial that we search our hearts to make sure that we do not have any ulterior motives in our judgment. Are our motives genuine Christian love and the sanctification of our brother? Or, are we really only interested in revenge and tearing our brother down? If our motive is getting even or damaging his reputation, then we simply have no business passing judgment until we repent. Believers are not sanctified by hypocrisy. Christians are not made holier by gossip, slander or insults. A heart full of unlawful hatred is the springboard for destruction, not constructive criticism.

Third, the need to remove the beam is consistent with the biblical teaching that a judge must have clean hands or else he is disqualified from judging. In other words, a person who is currently guilty of some serious or scandalous sin has no business probing into the affairs of

others and sitting in judgment over them. Our Lord stated this principle in His confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees about the woman caught in adultery. He challenged these hypocrites saying, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first" (Jn. 8:7). By this statement the Savior was not telling the Jews that they had to be sinless to judge this woman, but rather was pointing out that habitual adulterers are not in a biblical position to stand in judgment over an act of adultery. They were hypocrites and knew it and so, one by one, they walked away. People who are living in sin and thus have so little respect for God's authority and law are not fit subjects to accuse others or to demand the enforcement of the law's sentence.

Fourth, a believer who is living in some serious sin cannot be a good example to other Christians. Rebuke, correction and judgment must flow from sincerity and godliness, not hypocrisy and declension. Hypocritical teachers and judges send two contradictory messages. With their words they may speak the truth and rebuke according to Scripture; but, by their hypocritical behavior they teach people to sin. Their judgment may be orthodox, while their lives are heterodox. Their implicit message is, "Do as I say not as I do." The old Jewish method of discipleship was not simply to teach people verbally, but also to be an example of how this teaching is to be reflected in one's life. A wicked, hypocritical judge will do great harm to the church.

Fifth, the necessity of identifying and removing the beam teaches us that judges must be humble. Pride was one of the main reasons that the scribes and Pharisees were unwilling to identify and admit their sins. Arrogance is often the platform for self-deception and hypocrisy. The man who is full of pride excuses his own sins because he is unwilling to admit who he really is. The identification and admission of sins would involve self-abasement. It would take him off the pedestal that he has erected. The scribes and Pharisees were more anxious to please men rather than God. Their pride, self-deception and self-confidence caused them to pervert justice, to look down on others and condemn the innocent.

If we are guilty of sinful pride, then we must cast this beam out of our eye, confess our sin to God and humble ourselves before Him. A consciousness of our own past failures before God and our own former struggles makes us approach our sinning brother with humility and sympathy. We know that we have fallen before and that it is only by God's grace that we have escaped the mire of sin. Humility leads to genuine compassion and a desire to help. Paul speaks to this issue from a different perspective when he writes, "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted" (Gal. 6:1). Only the person who is spiritual, who has dealt with the sinful habits in his own life and walks daily with God is qualified to approach an erring brother. Only such a one can come with gentleness, lowliness, sympathy and perform what is needed. The Pharisees were not like this at all and thus Jesus said of them, "They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch" (Mt. 15:14).

Sixth, the injunction implies that, once we have removed the beam out of our eye, we need to be *close* to our brother to remove the speck out of his eye. Our Lord presupposes the intimacy of the local church and close church fellowship. One of the reasons that Christ has organized the church into local congregations is that people who are close to us, with whom we become intimate friends, are best able to see our faults and deal with them in a careful, surgical manner. "The eye is the most sensitive organ of the body and the most easily damaged. A steady and gentle hand is required to extract the foreign substance from it. Care should be taken in selecting the *best time* to approach an erring brother, so that the reproof is likely to be

effectual.”<sup>11</sup> Correction is not to be by e-mail or letter or even the phone (except in extraordinary circumstances), but rather in person. Our Lord’s teaching is in perfect harmony with Matthew 18. People who attempt eye surgery through e-mail do not have the close intimate contact necessary for careful communication required in admonition.

## Other Biblical Examples of Unlawful Judgment

In the passage before us, our Lord focuses His attention upon hypocritical judgment; however, it is not the only judgment condemned by the Word of God. Consequently, as part of the application of our Lord’s imperative, we will consider other forms of unlawful judgment.

First, there are ecclesiastical, moral or religious judgments that are based on human regulations instead of the Scriptures. These judgments are a form of legalism because they violate the principle of *sola Scriptura* (i.e. Scripture alone). The Bible teaches that God’s Word is our sole standard for doctrine, ethics, worship and church government. Therefore, if a Christian sets out to judge or condemn another believer for a certain behavior, then he must demonstrate that that behavior violates the teaching of the Word of God. If the conduct does not contradict the teachings of Scripture in any way, then such judgment would be based solely on human opinion or tradition.

This was a serious problem in our Lord’s time. For example, the Pharisees followed all sorts of man-made religious traditions and consequently came into conflict with Jesus on a number of occasions. They judged Him to be guilty of a serious offense for eating without first practicing a ritual hand washing (Mt. 15:1-2). The Savior strongly condemned their legalism saying, “In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mt. 15:9). Because of their various human regulations regarding the Sabbath day, the Pharisees condemned our Lord for plucking and eating a few heads of grain on the Sabbath (Mk. 2:23-24) and even for healing the sick (Jn. 5:16).

The problem of legalism and unlawful judging has plagued the Christian church almost from the beginning. Paul, for example, had to admonish believers at Colossae on this matter because they were subjecting themselves to human regulations that had nothing to do with the Word of God (Col. 2:20). These regulations, “do not touch, do not taste, do not handle” (Col. 2:21), are “according to the doctrine and commandments of men” (Col. 2:23). They are of no use in subduing the sinful flesh (cf. Col. 2:23). Apparently, some of the Colossians were basing their ethics on principles from neo-Platonism. “The Holy Spirit points out that in such cases to judge a brother is to ‘speak evil of the law’ (James iv, 11), which means that he who condemns a brother for anything which *God* has *not* proscribed regards the Law as being faulty because it has not prohibited such things. ‘He who quarrels with his brother and condemns him for the sake of anything not determined in the Word of God does thereby reflect on His Word as if it were not a perfect rule.’”<sup>12</sup>

When judgment is only in accord with truth and, therefore, is righteous judgment (Jn. 7:24), then and only then does true liberty or freedom reign. This is the true meaning of the rule of law. Today most churches do not fully understand *sola Scriptura* and, consequently, people are unlawfully judged for all sorts of things that are not violations of God’s Word (e.g., the moderate use of alcoholic beverages, the modest use of jewelry and earrings, not celebrating man-made holy days such as Christmas, not singing uninspired songs in worship, etc..).

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<sup>11</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 265.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 265.

Second, the Bible forbids partiality in judgment. “You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor” (Lev. 19:15). It is very common in our modern society for people to be either too lenient or too harsh on someone in judgment based on a person’s social status. The Bible condemns such behavior and orders us to administer justice without regard to the status of the person being judged. That is the only way that judgment can be fair and objective. The law of God is the standard of justice and not our personal biases or emotions. Noordtzijs writes,

Ancient Near Eastern society operated primarily in terms of unwritten law, in which the social position of the respective parties could exert more influence than considerations of justice. The demands of the law could thus often be frustrated by the commission of *awel* (“injustice, perversion”), whether this arose from feelings of sympathy, from fear of the rich and powerful, or through the influence of other members of society who also had an interest in the case. This was never to happen in Israel, however. The same law applied here to all persons (cf. Exod. 23:2-8; Deut. 16:19-20; Zech. 8:16), for law was no mere human invention, but was rather the codification of God’s will (see Exod. 21:1). The justice of the Lord stands behind and supports a nation that exercises justice in its own affairs. In Israelite society, the law was to be administered with total impartiality, and there was therefore no room for any form of class justice.<sup>13</sup>

Third, judgment is unlawful and unfair when it is based on gossip, rumor, hearsay or slander. Tragically, many churches and even ecclesiastical courts today are riddled with gossip and unconfirmed rumors. Things are said of people that are often untrue, distorted and exaggerated and then judgments are formed about brothers that are completely inaccurate and unfair. Such behavior, though common, is wicked and is strongly condemned by the Word of God. “You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people” (Lev. 19:16). “Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases” (Pr. 26:20; cf. v. 22; 11:13; 18:8; 20:19). “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters” (1 Pet. 4:15). Note that Peter places being a busybody in with sins that are very serious and scandalous. Gossip, idle talking and insinuating, exaggerating or hinting evil about another Christian is a form of unlawful judgment and a serious offense. “The villages and cities of Israel, their households and their family circles, were exposed to this pestilence. ‘The tongue is set on fire of hell.’”<sup>14</sup> Satan loves to kindle the flames of gossip, slander and injustice in the church. “Without the benefit of a trial, all slander serves to give a false or unjust judgment about a person and leaves him only a negative recourse. Slander suits are difficult to win and often do as much damage in themselves as the slander does. They are also very costly.”<sup>15</sup>

Fourth, judgment is unlawful when it is based on assumptions, a lack of evidence, or one-sided testimony. “He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him” (Pr.

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<sup>13</sup> A. Noordtzijs, *Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 198. S. H. Kellogg’s application of this passage to his day is still relevant in our time of growing statism: “A plain warning lies here for an increasing class of concern for the poor, but who in their zeal for social reform and the diminishing of poverty are forgetful of righteousness and equity. It applies, for instance, to all who would affirm and teach with Marx that ‘capital is robbery’; or who, not yet quite ready for so plain and candid words, yet would, in any way, in order to right the wrongs of the poor, advocate legislation involving practical confiscation of the estates of the rich” (*The Book of Leviticus* [Minneapolis: Klock & Klock (1899) 1978], 400).

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Bonar, *Leviticus* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1846] 1966), 348.

<sup>15</sup> Rousas John Rushdoony, *Leviticus* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2005), 220.

18:13). It is foolish and unbiblical to come to a judgment about a person's behavior when one has only heard one side of the story. (This assertion is obviously intimately related to the previous point.) One cannot come to a fair conclusion on a matter without first hearing both sides and weighing all the evidence. Justice requires patience, diligence and objectivity. Listening to one side of an issue *without* also considering the other side *at the same time* can prejudice judges ahead of time. Then, when they finally do see the other evidence their view is tainted and prejudiced against it. This unfairness and injustice is very common today in Presbyterian judicial procedures. A person involved in a dispute will gain the ear of presbyters and, in many cases, their minds are made up long before they hear the other side.

A closely related passage reveals that often a proper judgment can only be arrived at by diligent inquiry and cross-examination. "The first one to plead his cause seems right, until his neighbor comes and examines him" (Pr. 18:17). A man comes along and gives his side of the story, but does so in a way that minimizes his faults and maximizes those of his opponent. But, when he is questioned carefully by someone with biblical wisdom it is discovered that his original testimony is distorted. He had lies and self-deception in his heart which led him first to deceive himself and then afterward his neighbors. "If a man can detect exaggerations on one side, and concealments on the other, amounting to untruthfulness in their general effect, it shows that the fear of God was not before the eyes of the witness when he emitted his evidence."<sup>16</sup>

Fifth, judgment is unlawful when it does not follow proper biblical procedures. When a person believes that he has witnessed another Christian commit a sin, he is first required to go to that brother privately; then, if repentance is not forthcoming he must take two or three witnesses; then, finally if necessary, he must take the matter before the church session (cf. Mt. 18:15-20). In the case of an elder, no accusations are to be received without at least two separate witnesses (1 Tim. 5:19). This procedure is designed by Christ to keep all the previous injustices (legalism, partiality, gossip, hearsay, slander, assumptions, etc..) from taking place. If proper biblical procedure has not taken place, then the case should be thrown out and, if possible, retried following the proper procedure. The teaching of our Lord in Matthew 18:15-20 is designed to protect the church from its members' own sinful natures. Because of remaining sin, we are prone to gossip and judge without the proper facts. We are also inclined to assume an authority over others that does not belong to us. Jesus set up a body of elders to rule in each local congregation and we must allow them to do their job. If we do not, chaos and schism will result.

Sixth, judgment is unlawful when it is unnecessarily harsh or unjust. In other words, the punishment must fit the crime. Because biblical law (i.e. the moral law—the ten commandments and the moral case laws that explain and flesh out the Decalogue) is held in such low regard in our day, not only in American society but also in many churches, judgments are often completely arbitrary. In the civil courts, a murderer may only get ten years in prison while someone who runs over a kangaroo rat with a tractor may lose all his property. In evangelical churches, a young woman who gets herself pregnant out of wedlock may get a baby shower, while a man caught drinking a beer may be excommunicated. There was recently a case in a Reformed denomination where a pastor was charged with being unloving and unpastoral for voting to discipline a woman who, without just cause, abandoned her husband. Today many Reformed churches are so saturated with antinomianism and the world's concept of love that men who adhere strictly to the Westminster Standards are held in contempt and are treated severely for any perceived minor infraction.

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<sup>16</sup> William Arnot, *Studies in Proverbs: Laws From Heaven For Life on Earth* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, [1884], 1978), 386.

Seventh, judgment is unlawful when it is not accompanied by love and mercy. This statement applies to judgment in a number of ways. By mercy we mean that in cases of discipline the person judged must be lovingly shown the biblical path to repentance, restitution and reconciliation. Judgments in church discipline cases are always carried out ultimately for the long term benefit of the one judged. Even when speaking of excommunication Paul says, “Deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:5). The offender was delivered to Satan so that his body would suffer affliction with the result that he would see his sin and repent. “It appears from 2 Cor. 7, 9-12, that this solemn exercise of the judicial power of the apostle, had its appropriate effect. It led the offender himself, and the whole church, to sincere and deep repentance.”<sup>17</sup> Thus we see that love and mercy are not contrary to a just sentence of judgment. It is rather ironic that those who, in the name of love and mercy, do *not* discipline members of the church actually do great harm to them because they hinder them from the suffering and affliction (that when accompanied by a work of the Spirit) leads to true repentance and reconciliation with the local church.

When coming to a judgment about a Christian, we should give the person the benefit of the doubt and put the best possible construction on the evidence when it is not clear. “Love suffers long and is kind...does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth” (1 Cor. 13:4, 5, 6). The person who is unloving puts the worst possible construction upon things and rejoices when his brother is snared in some sin. Such behavior is wicked and contrary to our duty to love each other as members of the body of Christ. These important truths, however, do not mean that we should ignore plain evidence, or give a heretic slack because he is adept at hiding fundamental errors behind equivocations and mixes his heresies with some solid truths. God never requires us to call evil good or heresy truth; nevertheless, because we have so much sin in ourselves and make many mistakes ourselves we must be extra careful so that we do not call light darkness and good evil. “We are not to go about with our eyes closed nor wink at sin when we see it, yet it is equally wrong for us to hunt for something to condemn and seize upon every trifle and magnify molehills into mountains.”<sup>18</sup>

Tragically, there have been many examples of people in local churches who do not like a particular Christian in their church. As a result, they keep a mental (and sometimes a literal) list of every minor rub and offense with the idea of eventually bringing that person down. Such behavior violates the law of love (cf. 1 Cor. 13), Matthew 18:15ff, and is condemned by Scripture with the strongest of language. As John says, “Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother” (1 Jn. 3:10). To go after another brother and disturb the peace of the church over minor doctrinal differences, personality conflicts, jealousy, envy, or personal animosity is not piety or godliness. It rather is the work of Satan. May God use our Lord’s penetrating and convicting teaching on judgment to root all such wicked unlawful judging out of His church.

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Hodge, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1857] 1959), 86.

<sup>18</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 266.

