

Jesus Teaches About Spiritual Discernment

Bible Background • MATTHEW 7:1–6, 15–23

Printed Text • MATTHEW 7:1–6, 15–23 | Devotional Reading • GALATIANS 5:16–26

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will: **CONTRAST** judgment with discernment and distinguish between them; **REFLECT** on the consequences of practicing discernment rather than judgment; and **MODEL** discernment instead of judgment.

In Focus

“Did you hear about that guy coming to speak at the community college next week?” Travis asked Regina.

“No, what is he coming to speak about?” Regina responded.

“He is teaching people how to use the power of their minds to unlock their potential and get rich in less than a year!”

“That sounds a bit unrealistic, Travis.” Regina remarked.

“But I saw a video online with all of this research he did. It seems to work for some people!”

“Do you know anyone it has worked for? Or who those people are and how they are doing after a year?”

“No.”

“Well, how about instead you come to this career fair where Jackie Malone is speaking.”

“Didn’t she go through a divorce a few years back? I heard she had an affair...”

“She did get a divorce, but that has nothing to do with her helping people prepare for work and to find jobs. She’s been a very successful business woman.”

“I don’t know...” Travis responded uncertainly.

It can be difficult to decide who to listen to and associate with when there are so many ideas, ways of living, and problems in our lives. How do you determine the difference between being judgmental and being discerning?

Keep in Mind

“Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep but are really vicious wolves. You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act. Can you pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?” (Matthew 7:15-16, NLT)

Words You Should Know

A. Judge krino (Gk.) — To pronounce an opinion or verdict often with the intent to criticize or condemn.

B. Discernment diakrisis (Gk.) — To distinguish, decide, pass sentence on.

Say It Correctly

Thistle. THIS-uhl.

KJV

Matthew 7:1 Judge not, that ye be not judged.

2 For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.

3 And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

4 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?

5 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.

6 Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.

15 Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.

16 Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?

17 Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.

18 A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

19 Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

20 Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

21 Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.

22 Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?

23 And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

NIV

Matthew 7:1 "Do not judge others, and you will not be judged.

2 For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged.

3 And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own?

4 How can you think of saying to your friend, 'Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye?

5 Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye.

6 Don't waste what is holy on people who are unholy. Don't throw your pearls to pigs! They will trample the pearls, then turn and attack you."

15 "Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep but are really vicious wolves.

16 You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act. Can you pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?

17 A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit.

18 A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit.

19 So every tree that does not produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire.

20 Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions.

21 Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter.

22 On judgment day many will say to me, ‘Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.’

23 But I will reply, ‘I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God’s laws.’

The People, Places, and Times

False Prophets. The time in which Jesus lived could be viewed as a marketplace of religion. There had been a number of (mostly political) Jewish and Gentile “messiahs” who promised their followers freedom from Roman rule. There were also a large number of sects and wandering prophets, including mystery cults, idol worshipers, philosophical schools, and state-sanctioned temples around the empire. Every group fought for followers, and all promised that their own form of belief was superior. The groups that professed to follow the Law of God and yet led people astray were identified as false prophets in this context.

Background

Matthew 7 is the last chapter in what is traditionally known as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). The Sermon on the Mount contains several prominent Scriptures including the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–12) and the Lord’s Prayer (6:9–13). The sermon is a collection of sayings where Jesus teaches His disciples about discipleship. However, due to His miracles and teachings throughout the land, crowds from all over have gathered to follow Jesus. Early on in Matthew 5, Jesus explains that He has come to fulfill the Law and that they are to go beyond exercising the letter of the Law to practicing the heart of it. The heart is love for everyone, including your enemies. In Matthew 6, Jesus focuses on spiritual disciplines such as fasting and praying, and taking care of the needy. He emphasizes that their personal piety is for growing closer to God, not for public admiration like the scribes and Pharisees. Finally Jesus lets them know that they can trust God to take care of them.

Why are all of these topics so crucial to discipleship and how do they set a foundation for discernment? How are these topics still crucial for discipleship today?

At-A-Glance

1. Examine Yourself (Matthew 7:1–6)
2. Examine the Fruit (vv. 15–20)
3. Be Obedient to God’s Will (vv. 21–23)

In Depth

1. 1. Examine Yourself (Matthew 7:1–6)

Through Jesus’ teachings we learn that judgment is a slippery road with more than one bad end. The first bad end is when we make ourselves judge, we will be judged not with grace and mercy but by how we judge others. While we are digging a grave of judgment for others, we are actually digging one for ourselves. Another end of the road of judgment is hypocrisy. Hypocrisy makes us blind to ourselves, our sins, and our need for transformation. We miss the new life that is available through Christ because we are too busy straining and focusing on what someone else has done. Yet Christ commands us to resist such hypocrisy. He instructs us to work to remove the sin out of our lives. That opens the door for us to rightly help our brother or sister remove the sin out of theirs. Also, Jesus lets the listeners know that what they have been given is sacred and valuable, and instructs them to be wise with whom they share their gift or grace. It is not about them keeping this to themselves, but not giving it over to those who reject the kingdom.

How does judgment and hypocrisy hurt the church?

2. Examine the Fruit (vv. 15–20)

In every movement for good there will always be people who join in and try to lead others away. The same was true for Jesus' movement. Jesus instructs His disciples to watch out for false prophets. He warned them that they will look and sound like real prophets but their fruit will be different. It is of the utmost importance to pay attention to the fact that both trees produce fruit. It is not the quantity of the fruit that makes a tree good or bad but the quality. The same is true for real and false prophets. The size of one's following does not dictate if one is a true or false prophet. False prophets will lead people down the road of destruction (v. 13). True prophets will lead people down the road to life that goes beyond abundant life on earth—the road to everlasting life with Christ. What false teachings are people settling for instead of receiving everlasting life with Christ?

3. Be Obedient to God's Will (vv. 21–23)

Just like false prophets, there are false disciples. These are people who appear to do the Lord's work on the outside but actually are disobedient to God. There are those who will prophesy in Jesus' name, cast out demons in His name, and perform miracles in His name. These are all good works, but they are not the only works that Jesus has for His disciples. Jesus is telling them not to just do the public works, but do the private works and apply all the teachings that He has shared. Signs, wonders, and miracles do not necessarily mean a relationship with God or integrity in obedience to God's commandments.

What activities have some church groups focused on that keep them from following all of Christ's teachings?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why does Jesus caution against judging others (Matthew 7:2)?
2. What offense are those who are told they won't enter the kingdom of heaven guilty of committing (vv. 21, 23)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. It can be a lot easier to point out other people's sins and shortcomings than to identify our own. How can we keep each other accountable as followers of Jesus without judging one another?
2. There are many people who proclaim to have found the truth and higher understanding in our modern time, are quick to discredit Christian tradition, but fully believe philosophies and religions they have just discovered through friends or on the Internet. Some of these individuals or groups use parts of the Bible to justify themselves. How can we tell false teachers in our digital society from those who are really speaking truth?

Liberating Lesson

Unrighteous judgment has a negative effect on individuals, the church and society. Too often groups of people are judged to be inferior because of social difference. Or more correctly, that social difference is exploited to justify war, oppression, and evil. All of this has economic, social, educational, physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual consequences. It comes as no surprise then that a basic request of historic and current freedom movements is for all people's humanity to be recognized and respected. Freedom fighters demand treatment free of unrighteous judgment.

What response does this require of us? The church is the body of the forgiven. God has decided to judge us based on the redemptive work of Christ rather than our works alone. As a result of this grace, the church should be a voice for freedom for all who are oppressed under unrighteous judgment. How should we extend the grace that we've received from God to others?

Application for Activation

- Write down ways that you have been hurt in church due to judgment and hypocrisy. Collect those cards and pray over them as a class that the Lord would heal the group from these hurts.
- Pray for God to provide your church with an opportunity to minister to people who have been hurt by hypocrisy in the church.
- Identify an area where God has delivered you and pray for an opportunity to share that with someone who is struggling this week.
- Join with a coalition of individuals that is fighting for justice in your community.
- Pray that people are delivered from false prophesy and that false prophets would repent and turn to God's truth.
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Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Matthew 7:1–6, 15–23

Matthew 7 concludes the Sermon on the Mount that began in chapter 5. Jesus starts a new section of the sermon with the subjects that deal with interrelationship. He speaks about and warns against the danger of being judgmental (vv. 1–5), or finding fault in others and leaving our own fault unattended. He talks about how to deal fairly with one another (v. 12), and concludes with a call for eternal decision and commitment to enter the kingdom of heaven. He then warns us about false teachers, describes how we can recognize them, and warns about the consequence of their falsity.

7:1 Judge not, that ye be not judged. 2 For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.

The chapter begins with a negative command as in the preceding chapter (6:19, 25, 31, 34). While the preceding imperatives deal with an individual's attitude toward oneself (for their good and benefit) and how to deal with stress, the instructions that follow deal with one's relationship to others—how to deal with others' problems and

faults. The verb “judge,” (Gk. krino, KREE-no) has a wide range of meaning and usage. For example, “judge” can be judicially used as in the court of law (i.e., summoned to trial so that one’s case can be examined and verdict passed upon it). It can also mean to pronounce an opinion either right or wrong, or to pass judgment on the deeds and words of others with the purpose of condemning— criticizing wrongly.

What does Jesus mean here? He does not have in mind the judicial judgment; neither does He forbid judging or discernment of any kind, nor correcting people when they are wrong. The Scriptures demand in several passages that we make right judgments and corrections (John 7:24; cf. 1 Corinthians 5:5; Galatians 1:8–9). Indeed, Jesus refers to some people as dogs (v. 6) and cautions His disciples against false prophets (vv. 15–20), as we will see later. The command “judge not” used here, therefore, forbids being judgmental or critical against others. We recall from the beginning of the sermon that Jesus was addressing a mixed crowd of people (4:25–5:2). The crowd probably included some scribes and Pharisees who were noted for their self-righteousness (cf. 5:20; 12:22–30) and condemnation of others. He therefore addresses them here and warns His disciples not to follow their example if they have the kingdom of heaven in view. This verb krino, used here is the same and has the same force as Paul and James use it in Romans 14:10–13 and James 4:11–12, respectively.

Why should we desist from judging others? Jesus gives the answer: so that “you will not be judged.” In other words, those who judge will likewise be judged; not necessarily by men, but by God, the great judge of all. Jesus explains this further in verse 2. Using a number of metaphors in the following verses, He warns them of the absurdity of criticizing or judging people’s small failings and cautions about the danger of doing so. First, he uses the metaphor of measurement with the idea of measuring or portioning food or grain to people. The metaphor is already explained in the first part of verse 2: “with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged.” It refers to trying to claim God’s judgmental authority (Romans 14:10) and consequently falling under God’s ultimate divine judgment.

3 And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? 4 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? 5 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. 6 Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.

Jesus states the second metaphor rhetorically, which puts everyone on the same level of unworthiness, and therefore incapable of judging or condemning other people. The word “mote” is a translation of the Greek noun karphos (KAR-foce), which can be any tiny foreign matter like sawdust or a small grain of sand. The “beam” (log or plank) translates the Greek word dokos (doe-KOCE), with the picture of a two-by-four or big log, highly exaggerated here. Jesus is not saying that it is wrong to help people, or to tell or correct people (in a friendly way) when they are wrong or at fault. Indeed, the Bible says that if a brother (or sister) is “overtaken in a fault,” those who are spiritual should restore the other “in the spirit of meekness” (from Galatians 6:1). Rather, it is wrong to point out people’s faults when in fact we have similar or even worse faults. How would one with a hyperbolically big log in one’s eyes be able to see the speck or sawdust in another person’s eyes without first removing the plank in his own eyes? The answer here is clear—it is not possible. It is hypocrisy of the highest order. It makes sense, therefore, that we judge or examine ourselves first, then we are able to correct our brother’s or neighbor’s fault in a spirit of meekness. We will then see clearly enough to help the other person with his or her own problem.

The next wisdom given through example in this section is to understand and be careful about whom you entertain and share important things. When something is supposed to be used for God, that which is holy, it should not be given to those who do not know how to handle holy things. When something valuable like a pearl is possessed, it should not be given to those who do not recognize its value. They will waste it and then hurt the one who shares it. In addition to being good general wisdom about recognizing the value of what we possess and with whom we share it (not talking about giving of resources, which Jesus instructs we should do boldly in

the same sermon), Jesus lets His hearers know the value of what is being offered to them: the kingdom of God. This passage speaks about the kingdom of God and the people of God over the false authority of the Pharisees and scribes. The kingdom of God is the most valuable thing Jesus could offer, and He reminds the crowd that as it is shared with them, those who can not handle it because of their unrighteous agenda (the dogs) will not receive it. Likewise those who do not know God (the pigs) will not receive the kingdom either. The ones who receive the kingdom in this life and the life to come are those who know God and recognize the value of the gift of God.

15 Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. 16 Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?

Jesus warns the audience to “beware of false prophets” who disguise themselves, figuratively speaking, in sheep’s clothes, “but inwardly they are ravening wolves.” The caution is that the audience should be watchful for false prophets or teachers who go about falsifying the truth. They do not come in their true colors; rather they disguise themselves and pretend they are genuine in order to deceive people. At first glimpse they look authentic, sound orthodox, show spiritual piety, and are usually difficult to distinguish from the true prophets. The issue of false prophets was not a new occurrence in the New Testament, but also an Old Testament problem (cf. Deuteronomy 13:1–5; Jeremiah 6:13–15; Ezekiel 13). Certainly Jesus must have faced this problem, and He knew that it would continue in the future of the church (Acts 20:29; 2 Corinthians 11:11–15; 2 Peter 2:1–3).

Just as Deuteronomy suggests ways to identify false prophets, Jesus uses a different metaphor, a tree, to indicate how to recognize the false prophets: by the fruits they bear (v. 16). John the Baptist used the fruit imagery when he called on the people to repent of their sins (Matthew 3:8, 10). The rhetorical question here allows the readers or listeners to supply the answer, which of course is obvious: Men cannot gather grapes from thorns, neither can they gather figs from thistles. Thorns and thistles are used synonymously here. “Thistles” (Gk. *tribolos*, TREE-bow-loce) are prickly wild plants that hurt other plants. They can produce beautiful flowers, but never good fruits. The beauty of their flowers can easily deceive, but their fruit can be poisonous and deadly. So is the case with false prophets.

17 Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. 19 Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. 20 Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

The inference is made clear in verse 17. The subject seems to be so important to Jesus that He repeats it negatively (v. 18). The tree and fruit imagery is mentioned again later in Jesus’ ministry (Matthew 12:33–37; cf. James 3:12; Galatians 5:22–23) and they reveal the type of character one possesses. Evidently, what we do or say will eventually disclose who we are. It may take some time, but surely our true nature will always come to light through our actions (12:33–37; Luke 6:45).

The outcome of such false prophets or the consequence of their action is again described using the tree metaphor. This is akin to John’s teaching (3:10). Just as the tree with bad fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire, so will every false prophet whose aim is to deceive people be judged; they will be cast into the everlasting fire. Although Jesus does not explain what type of falsehood these prophets would teach, the evidence of their falsity is widespread, in the Old Testament, to the time of Jesus and the apostles, and very much in our own time. From the context, we know that their main purpose is to lure people away from the strait gate and narrow way that leads to life, into the wide gate and broad road that leads to destruction (vv. 13–14). The evidence of false prophets/teachers and preachers is everywhere. Just as Jesus says, they come in different forms, as true and quinine preachers and teachers who draw large crowds, but never show their true colors as deceivers. Just like their master the devil, they come as angels of light and suffer the same fate (2 Corinthians 11:13–15). They speak eloquently, articulately, convincingly, and with great conviction, but inwardly they are deceitful.

It is important to note that trees take time to grow and mature, then they bear their fruits. The point is that it takes time. In the same way, it may take (and oftentimes takes) a long time to discern false prophets and their teaching. However, as time goes on, their actions and words will betray them. Examples of such people in the last two or three decades are not difficult to cite. The call here is that children of God should be alert and watchful, for false prophets are always around.

21 Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? 23 And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity

Jesus is making a point that it is not simply calling Jesus Lord that gets someone into the kingdom of God. It is not even performing miracles, prophesying, and doing works that makes someone fit for God's kingdom. It is by faith in Jesus Christ evidenced in doing the will of God that we enter into the kingdom of God. Jesus was speaking another word of conviction to the listening crowd.

It is remarkable to note here again that Jesus refers to God as "my Father" as opposed to simply God declaring that Jesus has authority and intimacy as God's Son, which the scribes and teachers that the crowd was used to hearing did not. Jesus also reaffirms His identity as Lord, stating that people will refer to Him as Lord and yet still not enter the kingdom of heaven. This indictment strikes at the heart of the hearer as Jesus ends this portion of His Sermon on the Mount. It is not simply knowing that Jesus is Lord that makes a person fit for the kingdom of God, or being able to be used by God. God uses whoever He chooses to do His will. It is in hearing the Word of God and obeying Him that we are made fit for the kingdom. The importance is the relationship and the obedience.

For Christians today this is an important reminder that our actions must line up with God's will, and that we are called to be in obedient covenant relationship with God, not simply to do "spiritual works" seen by others. Indeed, Jesus will say to those who try to read their spiritual resumes to Him that He never knew them—they did what was sinful and thought their "spiritual works" would cover them. Jesus tells His hearers that God is interested in obedient relationship more than empty words and flashy works.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Walk by the Word and Prosper
(Psalm 1)

TUESDAY

Godly Trust Leads to Fruitful Life
(Jeremiah 17:5–8)

WEDNESDAY

Settle Differences Face to Face
(Matthew 18:15–20)

THURSDAY

How Believers Judge Grievances
(1 Corinthians 6:1–6)

FRIDAY

Asking and Receiving Fairly
(Matthew 7:7–14)

SATURDAY

Hearing and Doing
(Matthew 7:24–29)

SUNDAY

Discerning Faith and Action Together
(Matthew 7:1–6, 15–23)