

Dear friend,

Beginning with this newsletter my monthly article will be in response to a question that has been posed by someone regarding a biblical text, a theological issue or an ethical issue. There is box in the foyer of the church where you can put questions you would like answered or you can email me your question at swany@riverhillsonline.org. The question for this month is: *“Compare Matthew 7:1-2 with Matthew 7:15. What should we say is wrong/judge?”*

Matthew 7:1-2 says, “Do not judge or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others you will be judged and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.” Matthew 7:15-18 says, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep clothing but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them... A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.” The questioner recognizes that Jesus prohibits a certain kind of “judging” and yet he encourages another kind of “judging.” In vv. 1-2 he apparently tells us not to judge at all, yet in vv. 15-18 he commands us to judge the fruit of those who claim to speak for God.

These paradoxical commands regarding judging are found in many other places in the NT as well (See Matthew 18:15-17, Romans 14:1 (Here in one verse we are told to judge when someone has a weak faith and then we are told not to judge him!), Romans 16:17-18, 1 Corinthians 4:3-5, 6:1-6, Galatians 1:6-9, 6:1-2, etc.). In fact in Matthew 7:5, in the same context telling us not judge Jesus tells us that after we have removed the plank from our own eye we will be able to take the speck out of our brother’s eye. The fact that we know our brother has a “speck” in his eye presupposes that we have engaged in some form of judging.

So the question is what sort of judging are we forbidden to engage in and what sort are we commanded to exercise? First of all, the command to not judge is not a command to suspend all moral evaluation. Jesus is not commanding us to act as though there is no such thing as good and evil, truth and error. He wants us to be able to recognize good and evil, truth and error. We are to stay away from those who promote evil and teach error (Rom. 16:17-18) and spend time with those who do good and teach the truth (2 Timothy 2:22, Hebrews 13:7-8) and we cannot do this without engaging in judging or evaluating what others say and do. We are to go to the brother who sins against us (Matthew 18:15) we, who are spiritual, are to go to the aid of a brother caught in a sin (Galatians 6:1). Again, this sort of helpful counsel cannot be given without judging that a person has sinned.

This sort of proper evaluation presupposes that we have an absolute standard of good and evil, truth and error to which we can compare what we observe and hear. That standard is God’s revealed word, the Bible. Therefore, one way to erroneously judge is to base our moral evaluation upon on our own preferences and prejudices. The only legitimate moral evaluation of what people do and say is that evaluation which is firmly rooted in what God has said is good and what God has said is true. We have a responsibility for

our own eternal welfare and the welfare of others to learn to judge all things by God's infallible word.

The judging that Matthew 7:1-2 is forbidding is not merely recognizing evil or error in another person but acting as though you are the other's superior. It is to judge the other as worthy of condemnation but not yourself. The problem with the judging of Matthew 7 is that the person who sees the moral failure in another does not see it in himself or herself. Paul clearly states the evil in this sort of judging in Romans 2:1, "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other you are condemning yourself because you who pass judgment do the same things." The error in this sort of judging is that we believe and act as though the error or evil we see in another is never in us. This is why Jesus says that we can only engage in the evaluation of another after we have first recognized that our evil and error is far worse than that which we observe in another. Our error is a plank in comparison to the speck of error in the other person.

How do I know when I am engaging in this forbidden form of judging? When I am shocked by the sins of others but not my own sins I am doing what Jesus said not to do. When I gossip about the sins and errors of others rather than talking with them directly, I am judging inappropriately. When we say things like, "I'd never do that;" or, "Can you believe what they did/said?!"—then we are engaging in this corrupt form of judgment. The most common form of this bad judging occurs when we are in conflict with others. When all we can think about is how much they have hurt us and we think little or not at all about how we have contributed to the conflict, then we can be sure that we are incorrectly judging. You and I are rarely in a conflict in which we have nothing for which to ask forgiveness. When we are unwilling to ask forgiveness first for what we have done, then we can be sure we are doing what Jesus forbids.

Waiting