

# **MATTHEW 7:1 REVISITED**

**BY MADS FREDSKILDE**

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QUITO, ECUADOR**

## **Matthew 7:1 Revisited, Part One – What Is Sinful Judgment?**

“*Do not judge*” (Matthew 7:1) is not only a command given by Jesus, but it is among the very pillars of the Christian faith, established in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Most of the commands given in this famous sermon, like “Do not murder” and “Do not commit adultery,” descend from Old Testament commands, but the command not to judge seems of a different kind. How are we to understand “Do not judge” in the prior context of Judaism, where judgment of others according to the law often was seen as the expectation of God's people? A short look at the attitude of the Pharisees at the time of Jesus will confirm this. There is much to say about this, but for now, let us suggest that Jesus wanted to prepare his audience to enter into the church that he was establishing (Matthew 16:18), *his* church, where both Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, poor and rich, male and female were going to live together and deal with each other's sins and imperfections, in Christian love (Galatians 3:28; Matthew 7:3-5; John 13:33). What a challenge in the segregated culture of that time! First, let's be a little clearer on what sinful judgment is *not* and what it actually *is*.

### **What Sinful Judgment Is *Not***

Showing another person his fault, when he has sinned against you, is a command from Jesus and therefore cannot be considered as sinful judgment (Matthew 18:15). If someone comes to us and shows us how we have sinned, a humble response is required. Likewise, we are called to be aware of the damage of sin in each other's lives (Hebrews 3:12-13), call people to repentance and restore them in a gentle and humble but firm manner (2 Timothy 2:25; Galatians 6:1). We must also remember the command for godly leaders to protect the flock and provide church discipline in biblical ways, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 5:12: “Are you not to judge those inside [the church]?” We can then conclude that addressing sin and enacting scriptural church discipline (by godly church leaders), is a biblical command and not sinful judgment.

### **What Sinful Judgment *Is***

#### *Judging or Saving? The Problem of Merely Pointing Out Sin*

Jesus did not come to judge the world but to save it (John 3:17; 12:47). This, of course, does not mean that there will not be judgment (John 8:50; 12:48), but the whole point of grace is that we *in Christ* do not get the judgment that we deserve. Instead we get the underserved gifts of salvation, restoration and transformation into the image of Christ (Romans 8; John 3:16). For some of us, it might come as a surprise to see how little Jesus pointed out sin in his disciples during his ministry. Although he often spoke to the heart of his disciples, he never called any of them prideful, selfish, lazy, etc., and when he did rebuke them, it was often in a gracious and nonjudgmental tone, e.g. “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41). Being God, Jesus had the ability to see every sin hidden in the hearts of men, and he had every right to judge (Hebrews 4:13; 12:23). Even so, he was little corrective, critical or judgmental towards his disciples, despite their obvious sins and ignorance. Why is that? Well, in Jesus' own words, he came to save people, to be a doctor to the sick, to set

people free, to show them the grace of God and to help them repent (John 3:16; Luke 4:18; 5:31, 32). Jesus was much more inclined to notice strengths in people than sin, and he was well aware of what research has now revealed: that people grow much more by focusing on their strengths than on their weaknesses.<sup>1</sup>

In the past, I have often “disciplined” people in critical and judgmental ways, mostly with good intentions, wanting to help them and to “let them see their sin.” I would gladly dish out conclusions, advice and directives without taking much time to listen (after about 30 seconds I knew enough anyway) and without even considering the fact that I could be wrong. When people complained of feeling judged, I would look down on them as prideful individuals, not accepting biblical advice. Ironically, I would always (and still do) hate it when others treated me in that same way. Although there is something good and biblical in taking advice, no matter how it is delivered, we probably all know how much hurt sinful judgment can bring to marriage, friendships, disciplining and all other relational contexts. We need to ask ourselves if our intentions are to help and restore people (a more difficult objective) or just to point out their sin (the easier solution). When we think we are helping people by merely pointing out their sin, we run the risk of committing two serious mistakes. First, if we don't understand the heart behind the action, we might judge someone sinful who was merely acting out of a different perspective than the one we operate under, as Jesus said: “You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one” (John 8:15). This happens often in marriage, when two people, raised in two different sets of cultures, try to find common ground. Second, if we merely point out people's sin, regardless of how severe it looks to us, we often leave them feeling judged and lonely in their battle against their sin. Biblical rebuke doesn't have to be harsh or judgmental, but most often is a matter of instructing and restoring people in a gentle spirit (2 Timothy 2:25; Galatians 6:1). We will do well to remember that it is *our* job to gently instruct and *God's* job to bring people to repentance (2 Timothy 2:25-26). Most of us who are married have experienced the negative effects of merely pointing out sin in our spouse, but also the success when we have gently instructed and helped our spouse overcome sins and weaknesses. If you are raising children, you will know that pointing out sin and criticizing often have negative results compared to getting into their lives, helping out, healing wounds and setting boundaries with age-appropriate discipline. As James reminds us, “Mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13).

### **Shame vs. Guilt**

I once read that we should never tell a child that he or she is a liar (nor lazy, selfish, etc.).<sup>2</sup> “Why not?” you might ask, “if he has a problem with lying or some other sin?” Well, because he might believe you and keep on lying, thinking, “*Since I'm a liar, lying is what I do.*” What should I tell my child then, who has a problem with lying? Well, maybe you should tell him the truth, that he is a unique and immensely valuable creature, created in the image of God himself, to be like him. That is why he is no liar. However, since we are all part of a fallen world, needing Jesus as our savior—you and I and everyone else—we all sin. Regarding sin, you and I have a choice, though: we can confess our sins, ask for forgiveness and ask God and other people for help in overcoming our sin, trusting that God will forgive us, heal us, transform us and restore us into the image in which he originally created us.

#### *The Difference Between Shame and Guilt*

Shame says, “I am a bad person, since I do such bad things.” When we feel ashamed, we feel unworthy, unlovable and unable to change. Many people use shame as a way of disciplining children, thinking that if they feel bad enough about themselves, they will stop doing bad things. Although shame is a powerful motivator in

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<sup>1</sup> Although we cannot neglect to grow in our weaknesses, most research in behavioral and learning science has shown that focusing on our strengths is the best way to improve our weaknesses. For an example, see the research of Dr. Martin Seligman.

<sup>2</sup> Cloud & Townsend, 1999. *Raising Great Kids*, Zondervan.

the lives of people, it is a profoundly unspiritual and hurtful one, as it is not able to sustain lasting growth. In addition, shame is an emotion, often determined by how we perceive ourselves in relation to others and not necessarily in relation to God. Jesus himself showed us that we can be shamed by men without being guilty of sin (Hebrews 12:2). Guilt, on the other hand, says, "I am a good person, but I did a bad thing. I can still change and do the right thing, because I am not bad, but good." Where shame centers on social expectations and negative emotions, guilt offers an opportunity for repentance and change (2 Corinthians 7:10).

How we think of others and ourselves makes a great difference. Are we profoundly good creatures, or corrupt and evil in nature? God's children need to look at themselves and each other as holy and blameless in the eyes of God (Colossians 1:22; Ephesians 5:27). They are God's servants under *his* judgment (Romans 8:33; 14:4). You are not a prideful person, but you acted pridefully. You are not lonely and depressed because you are a terrible person; you were created for relationships and for love. You might have some growing to do, but he has chosen you and adopted you as his son or daughter. And he predestined you to overcome and to be transformed into the likeness of his Son (John 16:33; Romans 8:29). So take heart, be patient and get ready to work.

### **Judging in Conflicts – The Problem of the Win-or-Lose Mentality**

We live in what some have called a courtroom culture.<sup>3</sup> In popular TV series, people are judged *in* or *out*, *good* or *not good enough*, and in everyday life, people are suing each other for just about anything, and legislation is becoming stricter and stricter to reflect this tendency. The consequences are:

*When we judge others or get judged ourselves, we are immediately into a courtroom dance, where winning and losing, accusing and defending become the music. The result: We don't let ourselves get close to people who judge us and those who feel judged by us keep a safe distance from us as well. In courtroom thinking we make a case, determine guilt and exact punishment<sup>4</sup>.*

This courtroom culture is hardly a new phenomenon, as Jesus himself addressed the human urge to solving conflict in a courtroom manner. In Matthew 5:25, Jesus uses courtroom vocabulary in describing how we often solve anger and conflicts (see verse 21-24 in context), as we "take each other to court," calling in witnesses and seeking judges and fair punishment of our adversaries. This was preached in sharp contrast to the biblical commands of seeking conflict resolution, loving our enemies, turning the other cheek and forgiving (Matthew 5:24, 39, 44; 6:14).

Conflicts are an inevitable part of life, whether in marriage, childrearing, discipling or any other human relationship. Resolving conflicts in a Christlike manner can be among the most challenging things in life. I know that I have damaged relationships in the past by my sinful judgment, and that some people have had to make safe distances from me in their lives and in their hearts. I also know how many courtroom trials I have held in my head, convicting people of sin, proving my case with convincing arguments and fiercely combatting any defense. Often what start as differences of opinion end up in quarrels, accusations and judgment of each other. When we accuse one another, we forget that *the* accuser, not our brother, is our prime enemy (Revelation 12:10) and that Jesus is our defender in the presence of God (Colossians 1:22). We forget to deal with the real problems, as we attack the person who is wrong in our sight, forgetting that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against...the spiritual forces of evil" (Ephesians 6:12). When we remember that conflicts in Christ rarely are about winning or losing, "then we can begin to turn destructive win-lose games into come-alive cooperation. In short, we can go for being friends, rather than victors."<sup>5</sup>

The Bible has a lot more to say about sinful judgment that is beyond the scope of this article. Among other things, the biblical concept of sinful judgment includes judging people's motives (1 Corinthians 4:5),

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<sup>3</sup> Petersen, 2007. *Why Don't We Listen Better?* Petersen Publications, 35.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>5</sup> Petersen, *op. cit.*, 40.

judging others according to one's own standards in disputable matters (John 8:15; Romans 14-15) and judging people according to race, socioeconomic status, gender, personality, etc. (Galatians 3:28; James 2; Romans 14:4).

### **Why Do We Judge So Much?**

#### *Helping People Repent?*

We all know that sin must be addressed, as it wages war against our soul, keeps us prisoners and can lead to spiritual death when full grown (Romans 7:23; James 1:15). The problem is that many disciples are confused about how to help their brothers and sisters repent of and overcome the sins that have enticed and imprisoned them. Too often, we focus on the righteousness and judgment of God, thinking that we can convince people to stop sinning by pointing to the evil consequences of sin and God's rightful judgment of sinners. Although the fear of God is encouraged in Scripture, in most cases it lacks the power to heal sinners. The Christian who lives by fear is not made perfect in love (1 John 4:18) and has returned to Old Testament requirements and laws with judgment and punishment following perpetration. We forget the power of sinful nature and our inability to stop sinning, about which Paul testified (see Romans chapter 7). "For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son" (Romans 8:3). Paul goes on to explain that the only thing that has power over sin is the grace of God, given by the blood of Christ, to Christians who repent and obey Jesus, living by the Spirit and being transformed into Christlikeness through perseverance, fervent prayers and the encouragement of the fellowship (Titus 2:12; Romans 6:14; 8:13, 15, 29, 36-39; Hebrews 3:12-13).

#### *Learned Behavior Can Be Unlearned*

All behavior is learned behavior, and many of us grew up in homes where critical and judgmental behavior was the norm. Our parents showed us early in life that feedback and correction too often came wrapped in critical and sarcastic remarks at best, or as condemning and punitive actions at worst. Some people (including myself) who were raised in this way later become Christians and populate our churches. Bringing poor relational skills, they are unequipped to deal with the human condition of sin and rebellion in a loving and nonjudgmental way. This also explains why so many people in our churches and elsewhere are hypersensitive to judgmental and critical communication. This only highlights the importance of learning how to communicate in truthful but nonjudgmental ways.

Whether we learned our sinful judgmentalism at home, in church or in society in general, we had best remember that Jesus expects us to obey *him* and not teachings and rules taught by men (Mark 7:7; Hebrews 12:10). Luckily, we are all *works in progress*, on our transformative journey, in the remaking of our characters in Christlikeness, and we can all change and learn new and constructive means of communicating in truthful, loving and nonjudgmental ways. In my next article, Matthew 7:1 Revisited: Part two – The Healing Power of Nonjudgmental Communication, I will propose eight biblical principles from the life and teachings of Jesus on how nonjudgmental communication can be healing and transforming in our marriages, families, discipling and in all other relationships.

### **Matthew 7:1 Revisited, Part Two – The Healing Power of Nonjudgmental Communication**

Why is it so hard to be open about our sins, struggles, weaknesses and temptations? I recently asked the leaders' group at my church this question, and not surprisingly, the consensus was this: "We are afraid of being judged." At a single brothers' meeting I asked the same question in relation to personal sin and purity and got the same answer. Most Christians know the biblical value of honest, deeply felt, gut-level confession, exposing embarrassing thoughts, feelings and facts to the light. However, we often fear what can heal us the most and

lack the courage to be the honest *me I see* in front of others. And for good reasons, I might add. When we are being the most vulnerable, we are also opening ourselves up to the most hurt from others, as Jesus reminds us: “Do not give dogs what is sacred”—they might hurt you (Matthew 7:6).

When Jesus gave the command, “Do not judge” (Matthew 7:1), it was among the very pillars of the Christian faith given in the sermon on the mount, and we will do well to pay close attention to this command. In this article, eight principles of nonjudgmental communication are presented, based on Matthew 7:1-5 and on the life and teachings of Jesus elsewhere.

### **1. Be helpful but gentle!**

*“How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?”* (Matthew 7:4). Most of us, at some point, have had the painful experience of something stuck in our eye, and we know that we usually need someone to help us remove it. It is close to impossible to get the thing out yourself. We need someone we trust, someone who has the skill and gentleness to remove from our eye this thing that is causing us pain. Matthew 7:4 is an extension of Jesus' command not to judge, and it is more about understanding how to help our brother deal with sin than it is medical advice for removing dust and planks from the eye. When we see sin in our brother or sister, we naturally want to help remove it. But how do we go about this in the context of not judging? Some of us are often quick to point out sin, being critical of others, but Jesus shows us that helping people overcome and remove sin is the goal. After all, Jesus himself came to save the world, not to judge it (John 3:17; 12:47). However, when we want to help remove sin, we need to be gentle, and some self-reflection is required (more about that later).

### **2. The foundation of helping is love—even hard things can be said in love.**

The foundation of our Christian ministry is love, as stated by Paul: “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Galatians 5:6). After all, the most important call we have is to love God and others (Matthew 22:37-40). Love is the foundation and the root of everything we do. We need this foundation of love to build any ministry that will last, and we need roots of love in order to see anything grow, whether in our families or our ministries. That was Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:17-18, and it needs to be our prayer too. When Jesus said some very challenging words to a rich young man, the gospel writer observed that he did it with love (Mark 10:21). The rich young man walked away, not ready to sacrifice what Jesus had demanded, but he still knew and felt that he was loved. Because God is love, both to friend and foe. His love is everlasting and his kindness is unfailing (1 John 4:8; Matthew 5:45; Jeremiah 31:3). People might turn away from us when we uphold the cross of Christ, but they should never feel unloved.

### **3. Your heart is where it starts—attitude is everything.**

Research has found that at least 85% of our communication is nonverbal. The words that we say only count for about 15% of what we are really communicating. In Luke 5:22 Jesus asked, “Why are you thinking these things in your hearts?” Jesus knew that he was being judged by the Pharisees (Luke 5:21). Yes, he knew because he is God, but also because it is easy to sense what others are feeling about you, even without a word being said. Sinful judgment starts in the heart like any other sin (Mark 7:21), and it comes out, not only in words, but also in nonverbal communication. It is the way we say things and the way we look at people and feel about them; and our body language often gives us away. Are we warm and loving or cold and judging? Not only are nonverbal cues an overwhelming part of our communication, but they are also deemed the hardest part to fake. Even your dog knows when you're mad, and he'll make sure to sneak out until you've loosened up. Humans are hardwired to sense love and to flee danger. So next time you say to your spouse, “Why are you late?” or to your brother, “Why didn't I see you at Bible talk?” realize that your words are only an insignificant part of your communication. Let's take a look at our hearts. Is there love? Or is there judgment? God knows, and our hearts may condemn us (1 John 3:20).

#### **4. Be humble—no one has perfect spiritual vision.**

Going back to Matthew 7, Jesus continues, “*First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye*” (Matthew 7:5, emphasis added). Helping our brothers, sisters, spouses or children overcome sin is a good and noble thing to do, as long as we remember that we are not God, we don't know it all and we don't see perfectly clearly. Jesus reminds us that sometimes we are blind, although we think we can see (John 9:41). We don't see clearly because we have planks in our eyes or, as some would say, we have blind spots. Jesus warns us that our own sin often prevents us from seeing others clearly, and when we are spiritually blind, we can lead others astray (Matthew 15:14). In helping people, humility is always appropriate, as we realize that our own sins, preconceptions and attitudes prevent us from seeing distinctly and helping our brothers and sisters without judging.

#### **5. Ask questions, don't assume.**

Since we are not God and we don't have perfect spiritual vision, we need to ask questions in a nonjudgmental manner. We need to have the humble attitude of wanting to understand the heart, feelings, thoughts and actions of our brother. Sometimes I don't know what I am feeling, what I am really thinking and why I did what I did, and I need someone to help me understand. Maybe Solomon felt the same way when he wrote: “The purposes of a person’s heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out” (Proverbs 20:5). Let us be that person of insight who can draw out the deep waters of the heart. Jesus was a man who asked many questions. In fact, he is recorded to have asked about 307 questions in the gospels. Curiously, he only answered three questions in his whole ministry, giving him the stats of asking literally 100 questions to every answer given, as one writer comments:

*Through Jesus’ questions, he modeled the struggle, the wondering, the thinking it through that helps us draw closer to God and better understand, not just the answer, but ourselves, our process and ultimately why questions are among Jesus’ most profound gifts for a life of faith.*<sup>6</sup>

#### **6. “Listen and understand” (Matt 15:10).**

“*Let the wise listen and add to their learning*” (Proverbs 1:5). Since we are not God and don't have perfect spiritual vision, we need to listen as well as ask questions. We might not know everything, and we might even be surprised and add to our learning when we listen. When Peter went with Jesus to the mountaintop (Matthew 17:1-4), he got excited and started running around, fixing stuff and asking silly questions. It seems somehow funny when God at that moment breaks through the clouds with the words: “*This is my Son, whom I love... Listen to him!*” (Matthew 17:5). Sometimes we are so concerned about doing things, fixing stuff, getting new ideas and asking new questions that we forget to listen. We ought to be quick to listen and slow to speak (James 1:19). Before we speak, we ought to listen long and well enough to really understand. We also know that “to answer before listening—that is folly and shame” (Proverbs 18:13), but we are often too concerned about our own agendas, opinions and what to say next, so that we forget to *really* listen before we answer—to our shame.

#### **7. Offer your help.**

So, when we have carefully listened and asked questions in order to understand the deep waters of our brother's heart, how do we go about being helpful? There is a lot to be said about this, but let me suggest the following five very basic principles of discipling: 1) be human, 2) let God speak, 3) point to Jesus, 4) listen some more and 5) don't forget to pray.

1) Be human. “*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s*

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<sup>6</sup> Martin B. Copenhaver, *Jesus Is the Question: The 307 Questions Jesus Asked and the 3 He Answered* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2014).

*throne of grace with confidence*” (Hebrews 4:15-16). We are able to draw near to Jesus in our weakness and sin because we know that he knows what our struggles are like. Jesus is human enough to empathize with our weaknesses. Are we human enough to be real about our own struggles, sins and temptations? When we are following Jesus in his humanity, we will be approachable to others and help them draw near to us.

2) Let God speak. *“For I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; the very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day”* (John 12:47-48). Scriptures speak louder than any human words, not only to the consequences of sin, but also to the healing that comes from repentance, made possible through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:1-2, 13, 29). We need to point our brothers and sisters to God and restore them to his love, reminding them that *“God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance”* (Romans 2:4). Too often, I hear clichés and phrases taught long ago, taken out of context and short of spiritual power and godly love to help people repent and heal. If we want to help others, we need to be saturated by the word of God ourselves and remember that the servant of God is one who *“correctly handles the word of truth”* (2 Timothy 2:15).

3) Point towards Jesus. *He* is the perfecter of our faith and our hope and savior (Hebrews 12:2). We are not teaching people to be morally good nor sinless Christians, but we are helping people mature in Christ and be conformed into his likeness (Romans 8:29), and as Paul says, *“To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me* (Colossians 1:29). Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, *“so that you will not grow weary and lose heart”* (Hebrews 12:2-3).

4) Listen some more. Sometimes our brothers and sisters (especially the more mature ones) have the best solutions to their own struggles. When we ask them, we can offer ourselves as supportive listeners who can draw out their needs and concerns and who can uphold them in their process of formulating answers and taking the steps of faith needed to see change. When we offer our advice, we should do it humbly and not like Ahithophel, who went and killed himself when he *“saw that his advice had not been followed”* (2 Samuel 17:23).

5) Don't forget to pray. *“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God... The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective”* (James 1:5; 5:16). We need to always give God the glory for all growth, change and healing. After all, we can only plant and water; it is he who makes things grow (1 Corinthians 3:7).

### **8. Evaluate the heart.**

We always need to examine ourselves (2 Corinthians 13:5) and remind ourselves that *relationship* is God's favored tool for transforming people. If our relationships are not working well, there is a block to growth and healing. We are not here to lord it over people's faith but to work for their ultimate joy (2 Corinthians 1:24). If our sinful judgment is causing others to stumble, we need to repent of it, no matter how insignificant we might perceive it to be (Matthew 18:6). We need to make it our habit to ask people we are close to how they feel about our relationship. Do they sometimes feel judged by us? We need to have the courage to ask our spouse, children and friends and listen to them, in order to learn and repent, remembering that people are not necessarily prideful if they sometimes feel judged by us.

For many years, I was guilty of sinful judgment towards my wife. I silently and sometimes very loudly judged her and accused her of being prideful, unspiritual and uncommitted towards ministry in the church. I have repented, and as we are now working together in the ministry, we have found a much better way that far surpasses judgment and accusations. We now talk more, free of sinful judgment (well, most of the time), and I try to listen more and offer my help with the things that are difficult in her life. I now greatly appreciate the help that I get from her and her different but complementary character and perspectives.