



## Defining the Believer's Biblical Call to Judge Part 1

By Bob DeWaay

Many times, after publishing an article that disputes the claims of someone's published work, I am asked if I had talked to the person privately. There are those who claim that debating ideas in the public arena should not happen unless there was a prior Matthew 18 process of adjudication. It is my position that Matthew 18 does not apply to the public interaction of theological ideas. In this series of articles, I shall examine various New Testament passages that explain what we must and must not judge.

It is not surprising that people are confused about the matter of passing judgment because some scriptures tell us we must make judgments and discern, and others warn us not to judge. We will see that Scripture provides straightforward, objective guidelines concerning making judgments and that both the commands to judge and the commands not to judge are understandable—and they are to be obeyed.

### DO NOT JUDGE – MATTHEW 7

The following teaching from the Sermon on the Mount warns us not to judge:

*Do not judge lest you be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. And why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.*  
(**Matthew 7:1-5**)

Before we interpret those verses we must look at the sermon in Matthew that preceded it. The Sermon on the Mount concerns motives and sin. For example, the hypocrite prays to be "seen of men" (**Matthew 6:5**). Jesus' sermon contains warnings against anger (**Matthew 5:22**), lust (**Matthew 5:28**), a command to love one's enemies (**Matthew 5:44**) and a warning against loving money (**Matthew 6:24**). Jesus addresses many sin issues in a manner that would show everyone their sinfulness and need for the Gospel. Jesus said, "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (**Matthew 5:20**). This statement would have shocked Jesus' hearers because the scribes and Pharisees were fastidious in keeping the law of external rules. A righteousness greater than theirs could only be the imputed righteousness of Christ that changes the heart. Without Christ's righteousness we cannot enter the kingdom.

Given this context, what is the meaning of **Matthew 7:1-5**? The answer is that we are warned against judging how righteous others are in comparison to ourselves. This passage is a warning against self righteousness. As sinners, we tend to minimize or rationalize our own transgressions and magnify what we see wrong in others. Jesus warns about this because self-righteousness like that of the hypocritical Pharisees will keep a person out of the kingdom of God. It is the poor in spirit and the persecuted who will

“inherit the kingdom of God” (**Matthew 5:3, 10**). These humbled people know they need a savior.

So does **Matthew 7:1-5** teach that Christians should accept all teachers and teachings without discrimination? No. This passage concerns peoples’ motivations and the degree of their internal righteousness. These matters we are not to judge. Other passages, which we will examine later, are concerned with judging the content of a person’s teaching. Before we study those texts, let us examine other passages that are used to suggest that false teachers should not be corrected publicly.

### GO TO YOUR BROTHER IN PRIVATE MATTHEW 18

As mentioned earlier, the admonition in Matthew 18 to go to your brother in private if he has sinned is often used to suggest that public teachings should be adjudicated privately. However, Matthew 18 does not address debate about the orthodoxy of someone’s public teaching but how to deal with one of Christ’s sheep who have strayed into sin. Let us examine the passage in context.

Matthew 18 begins with the disciples discussing who would be the greatest in the kingdom. Jesus saw a danger in their attitude that could be very harmful to the church. The rest of Matthew 18 deals with relationships in the church, particularly how the “little ones” (meaning believers not young children – **Matthew 18:6**) are treated. The problem Jesus foresees in the discussion of who is greatest, is that “little ones” (believers who may appear unimportant to those concerned about their own “greatness”) would be mistreated by those whose motives are wrong. Matthew 18 contains teachings to insure that every believer is seen as important and every effort is put forth to preserve their spiritual well-being.

In this context, we read this:

*And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer. (**Matthew 18:15-17**)*

At issue is a “little one” who has become a straying sheep (**Matthew 18:12**). The tendency is for people who are seeking greatness in the kingdom to allow the sinner to wander off and perish rather than put forth the effort to preserve him or her. Jesus said, “Thus it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish” (**Matthew 18:14**). As we have seen, the little ones are believers, and it is not God’s will that a believer perishes. So the “lost sheep” that is rescued is a straying believer.

Given the immediate context, reproving in private someone who sins shows a willingness to take steps to keep one of the Lord’s flock from perishing. It is not specified what particular sin may be at issue, but rather what the motives of the church members (i.e., disciples of Jesus Christ) are. They are to care about the well being of the little ones who may not appear important to others, but who are important to God.

The entire process outlined in Matthew 18 is about preserving church members from perishing. If the process does not result in the person repenting, they are to be assumed to be a lost sinner (a Gentile and a tax-gatherer). Lost sinners are the subject of gospel preaching. Any true Christian who has been confronted by this process will seek repentance and restoration. Those who claim a right to sin however they see fit show no evidence of regeneration. They are not “little ones” but targets for the gospel.

So, does this passage tell us that public false teaching should never be corrected or judged without first gaining the permission of the false teacher? No. As we shall see in many other passages, false teaching cannot be allowed into the church for precisely the reason Jesus tells us to care for the flock. The spiritual well-being of His “little ones” is more important than that aspirations of those who deem themselves “greatest in the kingdom.” The flock must be protected and preserved. Allowing wolves into the congregation under the guise of Matthew 18 would be a horrible abuse of the passage.

Notice that verse 16 says that two or three witnesses should confirm “every fact.” This is important, because someone could falsely accuse another of sin. What is being confirmed by the witnesses is that the person in question is guilty of the sin and refuses to change. In the case of publicly broadcast and published teachings, there is no need for this process because the “facts” are already public knowledge. What is needed is to compare the teachings to Scripture, not determine if the person is committing a sin and hiding it. At issue in public teaching is the integrity of the faith once for all delivered to the saints, not sin in the local fellowship.

#### **DO NOT PASS JUDGMENT – 1CORINTHIANS 4**

Paul warns the Corinthians about wrongly passing judgment: “*Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God*” (1Corinthians 4:5). This passage indicates that there are some things we will not know until God’s future judgment. One of these things is mentioned in this passage: “the motives of men’s hearts.” We should avoid judging what we do not know. People’s motives are often hidden from us, but their teachings are public information.

Consider what Paul said in Philippians:

*Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice. (Philippians 1:15-18)*

It is not clear how Paul knew about these bad motives, but it is instructive to see his response. Because the content of their message was the true gospel, Paul rejoiced. This is in clear contrast to what he said elsewhere when the content of the message was wrong: “*But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to*

*that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:8).* It is safe to assume that an angel from heaven would be a nice person with good motives. But a false gospel is damning and still must be rejected. There are many “nice people” with damnable false teachings.

The content of the wrong judgment that the Corinthians were making had to do with matters that cannot be known now:

*Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that in us you might learn not to exceed what is written, in order that no one of you might become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. For who regards you as superior? And what do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? (1Corinthians 4:6, 7)*

As shown also in 1Corinthians 1, they were in the habit of judging who was superior and aligning themselves with human personalities. Paul is telling them not to do that. Who is superior spiritually is not known, and will not be known until God passes judgment in the future. But what can be known is “what is written.” There is an objective standard for judging teaching, but not for judging motives and the relative superiority of personalities.

We have seen a consistent theme so far. We are not to judge the motives or the relative degree of righteousness of other believers. But we must judge what is taught, whether it is in accordance with the true gospel and what has been written in Scripture.

In part 2 of this series we shall carefully examine the section of Scripture in Matthew 7 about judging by the fruits. What we will see is that this section of Scripture is often misinterpreted because of the failure to understand what Jesus means by “fruit.” We shall also introduce the important idea that church leaders themselves must make judgments in order to distinguish between true teachers and wolves so that they can guard the flock.

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