

Do Not Judge? What Jesus Really Taught About Judgment and Discernment

Few teachings of Jesus are more misunderstood or misapplied than His words on judgment. Some use "do not judge" as a shield against accountability. Others judge harshly and self-righteously. Jesus calls us to something better than both extremes.

What Does "Do Not Judge" Actually Mean?

Most people are familiar with Matthew 7:1-5. But fewer know John 7:24, where the same Jesus says something that might surprise you.

"Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment." - John 7:24 English Standard Version (ESV)

The same Jesus who said "do not judge" also commanded us to "judge correctly." So what is He really teaching?

The question is not whether Christians should judge. The real question is how Christians should judge.

The Two Extremes Jesus Rejects

Extreme One: The Pharisee

This is the person who sees everyone else's failures while remaining blind to their own. They are critical, self-righteous, and condemning. They have it all figured out, and anyone who thinks or lives differently is headed in the wrong direction. This posture runs deep and is hard to root out.

Extreme Two: Modern Relativism

This is the "who am I to judge?" response. On the surface it sounds humble, but it can actually reflect laziness, a desire to avoid accountability, or simply not wanting to get involved. This posture has taken a deep hold not only in our culture but in the church as well.

Jesus rejects both of these extremes. He calls us to humble self-examination, loving restoration, and righteous discernment.

What Jesus Is Actually Condemning in Matthew 7

"Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" - Matthew 7:3 English Standard Version (ESV)

Jesus is not telling us to ignore sin, eliminate accountability, or accept every belief and lifestyle as equally valid. He is condemning three specific types of judgment.

- Self-righteous judgment: Seeing everyone else's failures while remaining blind to your own.
- Condemning judgment: Acting as if you know someone's heart, motives, or eternal standing before God. That is a position God has never placed us in.
- Hypercritical judgment: Looking for faults in others rather than seeking their restoration, often because it feels good to point out a struggle you do not personally share.

Questions to Ask Yourself

- What sin or "plank" are you ignoring in your own life?
- Where are you most critical of others?
- Whose faults occupy your mind more than your own?

Why Self-Examination Must Come Before Correction

Notice that in Matthew 7:5, Jesus does not say to ignore the speck in your brother's eye. He says to first remove the plank from your own. The key word is "first." He removes the plank so you can see clearly enough to actually help someone else.

Galatians 6:1 puts it plainly: "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore Him in a Spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted." - Galatians 6:1 English Standard Version (ESV)

Before stepping into a correction conversation, ask yourself: Have I examined my own heart? Am I motivated by love and a desire to restore, or am I seeking to be right?

People who have genuinely experienced the grace of Jesus tend to become gentle people. Broken people become the most effective restorers.

What Does It Mean to Judge Righteously?

John 7:24 gives us the standard. Righteous judgment is not based on appearances, emotions, assumptions, or rumors. Here is what it does look like.

- Judge according to truth. Not by first impressions or social media clips or political labels.
- Judge according to Scripture. Personal opinion is not the standard. God's Word is.
- Judge with humility. Recognize that you are capable of the same failures as the person you are evaluating.

What Is the Difference Between Discernment and Condemnation?

This distinction matters deeply. Condemnation says, "I am better than you." Discernment says, "I care about you too much to ignore this."

Condemnation destroys. Discernment protects. Condemnation shames. Discernment restores.

Parents must discern what is best for their children without condemning them. Church leaders must discern without condemning. Believers must discern without condemning. The issue is never whether discernment is exercised. The issue is the Spirit in which it is exercised.

A Practical Framework for Judgment as a Disciple

When engaging with an unbeliever, the focus should not be on their behavior. The focus is on them being reconciled to Christ. The gospel message is the priority, not behavior modification.

When engaging with a fellow believer, work through these questions before stepping in.

- Have I examined myself first?
- Am I trying to restore or to condemn?
- Am I judging by truth or by appearance?
- Is this person receptive to correction?

If the answers lead you forward, proceed with humility, love, and a heart set on restoration.

Three Responsibilities Every Believer Carries

- Look inward. Deal honestly with the plank in your own eye.
- Look outward. Help others gently and with truth.
- Look upward. Stand on the truth of God's Word, not the shifting standards of culture.

The world says never judge anyone. The Pharisee judges everyone. Jesus says judge yourself first, then judge rightly so you can lovingly help others.

The Christian is not called to be a fault finder or a truth avoider. We are called to be grace-filled truth tellers who have first stood honestly before God.

Life Application

This week, before you form a judgment about someone else's behavior, choices, or struggles, pause and do the harder work first. Spend time in honest self-examination. Identify one area of your own life where you have been avoiding accountability, and bring it before God in prayer. Then, if there is someone in your life who needs a gentle, loving word of truth, approach them from that place of humility rather than from a place of superiority.

Ask yourself these questions as you go into the week.

- Is there a "plank" in my own life that I have been ignoring while focusing on the struggles of others?
- When I feel the urge to correct or confront someone, am I motivated by love and a desire to restore them, or am I motivated by something else?
- Am I practicing discernment or condemnation in my closest relationships, and what would it look like to shift toward restoration?