Spiritual Discernment

Matt 7:1-6, 15-23
SS Lesson for 07/28/2019

Devotional Scripture: Gal 5:16-26

OUTLINE

LESSON BACKGROUND AND KEY VERSE

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary
Key Verse: Matt 7:15-16
Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

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- Do not judge because there is an appointed time for judgment (1 Cor 4:5)
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Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

In 1997, Dean Merrill published his provocative book, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry Church. The book expresses what many millennials (those born between approximately 1982 and 2004) believed about the church of their parents. Merrill describes a church acting like a moral bully. From its moral high ground of self-righteousness, it bludgeoned the changes occurring in culture. Though sin was running rampant outside the church, the feeling was that sin was absent within. Woe, then, to the member who admitted to moral failure or weakness, for he or she would feel the full wrath of the church. For some, this is the great debate of the church: legalism or liberty? Do we draw lines restricting fellowship, or do we open the doors for all to come in without enforcing moral guidelines? (And the debate takes on a different tone when framed as being one of legalism or liberty or license?) No one I know willingly admits to being a legalist, for this is always a negative label, always to be avoided. Legalism does exist, however. At its core it is an orientation that treats rules as more important than people. Legalists often occupy themselves with controlling the behavior of others. Legalism can be an attempt to rally a whole community against sinful behavior. Sadly, in its obsession to crush sin, it may crush sinners instead. Wouldn’t the church be a happier place if we ran off all the legalists? Not so fast. In this lesson, Jesus tells his disciples not to judge, then advises them to judge. Where do we find the balance? Can we love the law and love people too?

An ordered society (like the nation of Israel in Old Testament times) needs judges to be third-party deciders over human disputes (see Exodus 18:13–27; Ezra 7:25). Deuteronomy 25:1 defines the role of a judge in Israel as one who makes decisions about “acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty.” To do the opposite—condemn the righteous and justify the wicked—is detestable to the Lord (Proverbs 17:15). As shown throughout the book of Judges, these leaders were meant to remain faithful to the Lord; only then would the people be led in his ways and enjoy his protection in Israel (see Judges 2:16–19). The Lord himself is the final and infallible judge of all the earth (Psalms 82:8; 105:7). In several places, the Bible portrays God as judge over all humanity (Exodus 12:12; 1 Chronicles 16:14; Romans 14:10; etc.). God does not consult a legal code for his judgments, because he is the author of the law. Human judges depend on laws and function best when they are enforcing clear and fair laws in an impartial way. People, though, are fallible, and even judges can be corrupt or unrighteous (Luke 18:6). Jesus did not embrace the role of judge in human affairs during his ministry (see Luke 12:14; in contrast see Acts 17:31; 2 Corinthians 5:10). Yet his teachings are filled with moral distinctions that identify unrighteous behavior. Jesus does not hesitate to expose hypocrites, identify their dishonesty, and thus pass a type of judgment. What we see is Jesus moving beyond mere application of laws in a courtroom setting to a discernment of human behavior based on motives and higher standards such as love for others.

Key Verse: Matt 7:15-16

15 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. 16 You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

7:1-6 (Luke 6:41-42). A final illustration of Pharisaic practices pertains to judging. The Pharisees were then judging Christ and finding Him to be inadequate. He was not offering the kind of kingdom they anticipated or asking for the kind of righteousness they were exhibiting. So they rejected Him. Jesus therefore warned them against hypocritical judging. This passage does not teach that judgments should never be made; Matthew 7:5 does speak of removing the speck from your brother’s eye. The Lord’s point was that a person should not be habitually critical or condemnatory of a speck of sawdust in someone else’s eye when he has a plank—a strong hyperbole for effect—in his own eye. Such action is hypocritical (You hypocrite, v. 5; cf. “hypocrites” in 6:2,5,16). Though judgment is sometimes needed, those making the distinctions (κρίνω, judge, means “to distinguish” and thus “to decide”) must first be certain of their own lives. Furthermore when seeking to help another, one must exercise care to do what would be appreciated and beneficial. One should never entrust holy things (what is sacred) to unholy people (dogs; cf. “dogs” in Phil. 3:2) or throw... pearls to pigs. Dogs and pigs were despised in those days.

7:7-11 (Luke 11:9-13). Earlier in this sermon Jesus had given the disciples a model prayer (Matt. 6:9-13). Now He assured them that God welcomes prayer, and urged them to come to Him continuously and persistently. This is emphasized by the present tenses in the verbs: “keep on asking”; “keep on seeking”;

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“keep on knocking” (7:7). Why? Because your Father in heaven (v. 11) delights in giving good gifts (cf. James 1:17) to those who persist in prayer. (Luke substitutes “the Holy Spirit” for “good gifts,” Luke 11:13.) No decent father would give his son a stone instead of a round loaf of bread (which looked like a stone), or a snake instead of a similar-appearing fish. If an earthly father, with his sinful (evil) nature, delights to do right materially for his children, it makes sense that the righteous, heavenly Father will much more reward His children spiritually for their persistence.

7:12. This verse is commonly referred to as “the Golden Rule.” The principle is that what people ordinarily want others to do for them should be what they practice toward those others. This principle summarizes the essential teachings of the Law and the Prophets. But such a principle cannot be consistently practiced by a natural person. Only a righteous person is able to practice this rule and thereby demonstrate the spiritual change that has come about in his life. An individual who is able to live this kind of life obviously possesses the righteousness Jesus demanded (5:20). Such a person’s righteous acts do not save him, but because he has been delivered he is able to demonstrate true righteousness toward others.

7:13-14 (Luke 13:24). Elaborating on the Golden Rule, Jesus presented the clear way of access into righteousness. The righteousness He demanded (Matt. 5:20) does not come through the wide... gate and the broad... road. Rather it comes through the small... gate and the narrow... road. In light of the whole sermon, it was obvious Jesus was comparing the wide gate and the broad road to the outward righteousness of the Pharisees. If those listening to Jesus followed the Pharisees’ teachings, their path would lead to destruction (apóleían, “ruin”). The narrow gate and road referred to Jesus’ teaching, which emphasized not external requirements but internal transformation. Even the Lord Jesus acknowledged that few would find the true way, the way that leads to life (i.e., to heaven, in contrast with ruin in hell).

7:15-23 (Luke 6:43-44; 13:25-27). After presenting the true way of access into His anticipated kingdom, Jesus gave a warning about false prophets. He referred to these advocates of the broad way as ferocious wolves who appear harmless as sheep. How can one determine the character of false teachers? He need only look at the fruit they produce. Grapes and figs do not grow on thorn-bushes or thistles. Good fruit trees produce good fruit, but bad fruit trees produce bad fruit. In Jesus’ evaluation, the Pharisees were obviously producing bad fruit; the only thing to do with bad trees is to cut them down and destroy them. If they do not fulfill their purpose for existence, they should be removed. Those hearing this sermon must have wondered about the religious leaders, who seemed to be good men, teaching spiritual truths about Messiah and His kingdom. Jesus made it clear they were not good for they were leading others astray. Even if they were doing supernatural deeds—prophesying in His name, driving out demons, and performing many miracles, they were not obedient to the Father, continually doing His will (Matt. 7:21). They would be refused admission to the kingdom because Jesus had no personal relationship with them (vv. 21, 23).

7:24-27 (Luke 6:47-49). In conclusion Jesus presented the two options open to His listeners. They were now responsible for what they had heard and must make a choice. They could build on one of two foundations. One foundation was likened to a big rock and the other to sand. The foundation determines the ability of a structure to withstand the elements (rain and winds). The rock foundation represented the Lord Himself and the truths He had been presenting, especially the truth concerning inner transformation. The sand spoke of Pharisaic righteousness which the people knew and on which many were basing their hopes. In storms the first would give stability; the second would result in destruction. Thus hearing and heeding Jesus’ words is wise; one who does not is foolish. Only two courses of action are possible—two kinds of roads and gates (Matt. 7:13-14), two kinds of trees and fruit (vv. 15-20), two kinds of foundations and builders (vv. 24-27).

7:28-29. After recording Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount,” Matthew wrote, When Jesus had finished saying these things. Five times Matthew wrote such a statement (identical or similar words), each time following a collection of Jesus’ sayings: v. 28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1. These serve as turning points or shifts in the book’s structure. As a result of this sermon, the crowds of people following Jesus were amazed at His teaching. “Amazed” (exepléssontο, lit., “struck out”) means “overwhelmed.” It suggests a strong, sudden sense of being astounded, and is stronger than thaumazō (“to wonder or be amazed”). Matthew used exepléssontο four times (7:28; 13:54; 19:25; 22:33). Jesus had just demonstrated the inadequacies of the Pharisees’ religious system. The righteousness they knew was not sufficient for entering His kingdom. The authority of Jesus is what amazed them, for He taught as a Spokesman from God—not as the teachers of His time who were simply reflecting the authority of the Law. The contrast between Jesus and the religious leaders was most pronounced.
Major Theme Analysis
(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Discerning Judgments (Matt 7:1-6)

1 "Judge not, that you be not judged.
2 For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.
3 And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?
4 Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye?
5 Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.
6 "Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces.

Warnings about judging (1-2)

Do not judge because judging condemns us (Rom 2:1-3)

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. 2 Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. 3 So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?

Do not judge because everyone will eventually be judged by God (Rom 14:10)

10 You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

Do not judge because there is an appointed time for judgment (1 Cor 4:5)

5 Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

Do not judge because everyone has stumbled (James 3:2)

2 We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.

Do not judge because there is only one Judge (James 4:12)

12 There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you — who are you to judge your neighbor?

Discernment in self-judgment (3-5)

Self-judge by asking God to test and examine us (Ps 26:2)

2 Test me, O Lord, and try me, examine my heart and my mind;

Self-judge by carefully considering our ways (Hag 1:5)

5 Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways.

Self-judge by verifying our faith (2 Cor 13:5)

5 Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you — unless, of course, you fail the test?
Self-judge by examining our own conscience (1 John 3:19-20)

19 This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence 20 whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

Discernment in witness (6)

Witness by speaking the truth in love (Eph 4:15)

15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

Witness as a child of light who displays the fruit of truth (Eph 5:8-10)

8 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light 9 (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) 10 and find out what pleases the Lord.

Witness God's truth understanding God's grace (Col 1:4-6)

4 because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints— 5 the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel 6 that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.

Discernment Leadership (Matt 7:15-23)

15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. 16 You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? 17 Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Therefore by their fruits you will know them. 21 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. 22 Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord,' have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' 23 And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'

Discerning false prophets (15-20)

False prophets trying to lead us astray (Deut 13:12-15)

12 If you hear it said about one of the towns the Lord your God is giving you to live in 13 that wicked men have arisen among you and have led the people of their town astray, saying, "Let us go and worship other gods" (gods you have not known), 14 then you must inquire, probe and investigate it thoroughly. And if it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done among you, 15 you must certainly put to the sword all who live in that town. Destroy it completely, both its people and its livestock.

False prophets using deception (Mark 13:22)

22 For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect — if that were possible.
False prophets from within the congregational church (Acts 20:30)

30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

False prophets tempting with lustful desires (2 Peter 2:18-19)

18 For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. 19 They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity — for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him.

False prophets that come as wolf in sheep’s clothing (Matt 7:15)

15 “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.

Discerning hypocrites (21-23)

Hypocrisy is saying one thing, but doing another (Matt 23:2-7)

2 “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. 3 So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. 4 They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. 5 "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; 6 they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; 7 they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'

Hypocrisy is acting like one is earnest, but actually just going through the motions (Isa 58:2-4)

2 For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. 3 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. 4 Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.

Hypocrisy shuts the kingdom of heaven from others (Matthew 23:13)

13 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

Hypocrisy is failing to see our own sin (Luke 6:42)

42 How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Hypocrisy causes divisions and obstacles (Romans 16:17-18)

17 I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. 18 For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.

Hypocrisy is manifested by actions not agreeing with words (Titus 1:15-16)

15 To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted. 16 They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.
Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

Judging Forbidden (7:1-5)

Few sayings of our Lord are better known or more often quoted than these words: “Do not judge lest you be judged yourselves” (Matthew 7:1). Likewise, few sayings are more misunderstood and misapplied. For this reason we must begin by dealing with what our Lord did not mean by this warning.

(1) Jesus did not mean that it is wrong to have law courts and law enforcement. Such was the understanding of Tolstoy. Other Scriptures clearly teach that government is a divinely appointed instrument to mete out punishment (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-14). Jesus did not dispute Pilate’s authority to execute capital punishment. Indeed, He stated that this authority came from God (John 19:10-11).

(2) It is not wrong to think critically. Some would have us believe that godliness is closely akin to gullibility. This is really an extension of the error some have made concerning Matthew 6:25 (“… Take no thought …” KJV). We should accept every statement of men on its face value, and in no way should we ponder or weigh it as to its veracity (we are told). That is not the teaching of Scripture (cf. Acts 17:10-11; 1 Corinthians 14:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:21).

(3) Neither is our Lord forbidding taking a decisive stand on doctrinal and moral issues. So often whenever a Christian takes what might be regarded as a negative position, the response is, “Judge not …” But the very context of our passage indicates that we must make decisions and take a stand. If we are not to ‘give what is holy to dogs’ (verse 6), then we must decide who are dogs, or hogs. If we are to “beware of false prophets” (verse 15), then we must determine who such men are. Paul took a public stand on the issue of immorality within the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 5:4-5). Timothy was instructed to take a stand in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3-7). We are to refuse to invite false teachers into our homes (2 John 8-11). We are also instructed to “contend earnestly for the faith …” (Jude 3).

(4) It is not wrong to correct those in error. In the 18th chapter of this same Gospel, Matthew recorded our Lord’s instructions concerning church discipline (verses 15ff). In Galatians 6:1, Christians are instructed to restore a sinning brother. Paul corrected Peter face to face (Galatians 2:11). Even the elders of a church are not above correction (1 Timothy 5:19-20). Good friends sharpen each other with constructive criticism (Proverbs 27:7,17).

What, then, did our Lord intend for us to understand by these words, “Judge not”? Since the Lord Jesus has all along been dealing more with attitudes and motives in the Sermon on the Mount, we are safe in concluding that the problem here has to do primarily with a critical, condemning spirit.

I have very little trouble identifying what our Lord has forbidden for there is much of this spirit in me. Often times I deceive myself by supposing that I am just being a critical thinker, when in fact, I am only a critical person. We all love to be critics. It is amusing to observe this during football season. We criticize the football coach for sending in such a ‘foolish’ play. We criticize the quarterback for throwing such a poor pass. We boo the referee for making such a bad call. No doubt we criticize the preacher for such a miserable message.

The criticism of which we are speaking is that which seeks to put others down, while elevating ourselves. It is the kind of smug disdain of those who feel superior to others.

“And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt” (Luke 18:9).

The contempt of the scribes and Pharisees was more than just the smugness of superiority. It was a snobbery based upon legalism. The Jews had a neatly packaged system of rules and regulations which prescribed an external kind of righteousness. Those who judged (condemned, despised) the hoi polloi, the masses, did so on the basis that those who were righteous kept their rules, but the rest failed to do so, and, indeed, were ignorant of those rules and regulations (John 7:49).

The underlying issue is that these self-appointed judges set themselves up as those who were qualified to pronounce upon a person’s spirituality by the standards of his own system of rules. They perceived righteousness to be achieved by the keeping of human rules. They supposed that men would conform to these rules by the external pressure of those religious leaders who judged their performance by their man-made laws.
This error is more prominently exposed in Luke’s account in chapter 6. Immediately after speaking of the folly of attempting to remove a small speck from our brother’s eye while we have a beam in our own (verse 41-42), our Lord went on to say:

“For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit; nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a brier bush. The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth which is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart” (Luke 6:43-45).

Here was the problem within Judaism in the days of the Savior. Here is the problem within Christianity today. Men are directing their efforts toward producing righteousness through external acts. Worse yet, they are attempting to force this error on others by pressuring men to be righteous by keeping man-made rules and regulations and rituals. These efforts are futile and doomed to failure because they do not change a man’s heart. True righteousness cannot be imposed from without, but must be exposed from within. No man can be made righteous until his heart is radically changed by God. Religion today is trying to reform men, but only Christ can transform men by giving them a new heart.

I must digress for one moment, my friend, and ask if you have received a new heart by genuine conversion, or are you still trying to patch up your old sinful self. God has sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to qualify as your sin-bearer by living a perfect life. He has died on the cross of Calvary to bear the penalty of your sins. He has been raised from the dead that you might live a victorious life and reflect God’s righteousness (though imperfectly) in your life. Religion and reform will never save you, only a renewal of heart can do that (cf. Titus 3:5-7).

Now that we understand what the Master has forbidden, let us concentrate for a moment on why such criticism is wrong.

(1) **Criticism is wrong because it usurps divine prerogatives and therefore invites divine judgment, verse 1.** “Do not judge lest you be judged yourselves.” Although it is not directly stated in this passage I believe it is to be inferred that when one appoints himself a judge of others he usurps a divine prerogative. In the Scriptures there are several passages which speak to this same evil (e.g. Romans 14, James 4:11-12). From these passages, we receive much helpful commentary on the meaning of Christ’s teaching. James wrote: “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?” (James 4:12).

Paul wrote in Romans 14:4: “Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls …” (cf. also verse 10). Judging is a divine prerogative. We take too much upon ourselves if we set ourselves over others to judge them. It is not the privilege or the position of a slave to judge other slaves. That is the responsibility of their master. We make ourselves masters (and not slaves) when we judge others.

(2) **Criticism is wrong because it arises out of impure motives.** The judging which is here condemned by the Master is wrong because it is criticism arising from impure motives. It attempts to emphasize one’s own righteousness at the expense of a brother’s reputation. On the surface such criticism may be done in a spirit of helpfulness, but this is only a shame. “I really love you, but…” “You’re a wonderful person, but…” “I’m saying this for your own good…” “This hurts me more than it does you, but…”

The only criticism or correction which is praiseworthy is that which is prompted by genuine love. Love does not seek a brother’s downfall, but his edification (cf. Romans 14:13,19). Love is reluctant to believe the worse and hopeful of the best:

“Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

“Love seeks to conceal unrighteousness, not to expose it” (1 Peter 4:8).

(3) **Criticism is wrong because it sets its own standards and judges other men by them.** We have already suggested that it was the legalistic rules and regulations of Pharisaism by which men judged others, rather than by God’s law (cf. James 4:11-12). The judging forbidden by Paul in Romans chapter 14 was that concerning ‘doubtful things’ (verse 1). Of these things men were to be ‘fully convinced in their own minds’ (verse 5), but since their observance was ‘to the Lord’ (verse 6), we are not to condemn.
This tendency to go beyond the requirements of scripture is clearly implied by the Savior when He warned that the standard by which we judge men is the standard by which we will be judged ourselves (Matthew 7:2). If we wish to be overly demanding on others, we must accept this same standard for our own conduct (cf. Romans 2:1-2).

It is so easy for Christians to confuse biblical principles and personal preferences, convictions and commandments. We then try to impose these upon others, and we judge men’s spirituality by how well they live up to our preconceived ideas of righteousness.

(4) **Criticism is wrong because it turns the focus of our attention outward rather than inward.** Personal convictions are to be kept to ourselves, not crammed down the throats of others (Romans 14:22). The entire focus of criticism is upon the lives and conduct of others, but this is none of our business, for each man must give account of himself before God (Romans 14:10). Here we are trying to correct the flaws in others, rather than concentrating upon ourselves. Criticism is minding other people’s business. We listen to a sermon and remark how we wished that Sister Smith were here to hear it. How we deceive ourselves!

(5) **Criticism is wrong because our knowledge is limited.** Although our text does not specify this error, criticism is wrong because we are not in a position to know all the facts. If we judged the young bachelor’s gift of a phony turkey from the perspective of the man whose ‘luck was down’ we would judge wrongly. You and I cannot judge without full knowledge of the facts.

Furthermore, we cannot know the motives of a man. In doubtful things (not in matters clearly forbidden, as the situationalist would tell us), it is one’s motives that make all the difference. If a man drinks wine or eats meat, doubting his freedom to do so, he sins (Romans 14:22, 23). Since we cannot know a man’s heart, his motivation for his deeds, we cannot judge him.

(6) **Criticism is wrong because our perspective is distorted.** You can imagine the smiles which began to work their way across the faces of our Lord’s audience as they saw the humor in what He was saying in verses 3-5. Here is the picture of a man with a large beam in his own eye attempting to remove a minute particle from the eye of another. The irony is that we often try to correct others while our own problems far surpass the errors of those we criticize and attempt to correct. This problem is emphasized in Luke’s account where he includes this statement of the Lord Jesus as an introduction to the paragraph on judging others while you have a beam in your eye: “And He also spoke a parable to them: ‘A blind man cannot guide a blind man, can he? Will they not both fall into a pit?’” (Luke 6:39).

The scribes and Pharisees looked upon themselves as the leadership of Judaism. They felt that as such they were obligated to judge those under their authority, and to impose upon their inferiors the full requirements of Jewish traditionalism (which they called ‘the Law’). Jesus clearly implied in Matthew 7:3-5 (and plainly stated in Luke 6:39-45) that those with the greatest problems were the leaders themselves. How often we project our own failures (sins) upon others, while neglecting our own responsibilities.

(7) **Criticism is wrong because it is hypocritical.** Finally, the kind of criticism condemned by our Lord is wrong because at its base it is hypocritical. “You hypocrite …” (verse 5). Criticism is hypocritical because it holds a double standard. I often hold to a very rigid standard when I condemn others, but I am most tolerant when I commit the same sin. This process is called rationalizing. What we call ‘losing your temper’ in others we redefine as ‘righteous indignation’ in ourselves. Often, by the way, we use the most pious terms for our own transgressions. We call income tax evasion ‘stealing’ when others do it, ‘good stewardship’ when we are guilty. We call exceeding the speed limit ‘speeding’ when others are doing it, ‘redeeming the time’ when we are guilty of it. If only we were as tolerant, understanding, and merciful with others as we are with ourselves. This is precisely the principle which is laid down in verse 12.

**The Two Guides (7:15-23)**

The decision which every man must make is not an easy one, for there are many godless guides who would lead us to the wide gate and the way which leads to destruction. These false prophets are not only blind themselves, but they lead others to destruction with them.

“And He also spoke a parable to them: ‘A blind man cannot guide a blind man, can he? Will they not both fall into a pit?’” (Luke 6:39).

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of Hell as yourselves” (Matthew 23:15).
Those who submitted to the religious leaders of their day would follow them on the path which led to
destruction. Above all else it was the Jewish leadership which rejected Jesus as Israel’s Messiah and put Him to
death. No wonder we find our Lord warning His listeners about false prophets: “Beware of the false prophets, who
come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matthew 7:15).

False prophets are particularly dangerous because they appear to be genuine. They seemingly have the
credentials of authority. What are these credentials? Jesus calls them ‘sheep’s clothing’ (verse 15). The
outward forms would incline one to believe these false prophets to be reliable guides. They may wear a
distinctive garb which sets them apart as leaders. They may have the title ‘reverend.’ They may be men who
hold positions of religious leadership. They may well have graduated from a divinity school. Indeed, they might
even be seminary professors. Judging on the basis of external indications we might wrongly assume them to be
reliable guides, but we cannot evaluate on such external evidence.

These false prophets can be detected by their fruits. Judging by external forms is risky; judging (if you prefer,
discerning) on the basis of fruits is absolutely accurate. ‘The proof of the root is in the fruit.’ Good trees
produce good fruit, and rotten trees, bad fruit. A dependable assessment of those who would be guides is that of
their fruits (verse 20).

What are these fruits? One must be very careful here, for false prophets are not without religious activities. A
false prophet is often accompanied by deceptive signs and by seeming wonders. Some of these are suggested in
verse 22: “Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in Your name, and in Your name
cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’” We should expect false prophets to engage in
acts of kindness and charity. We should expect them to perform deeds which suggest miraculous power. And
we should expect that these deeds be performed under the pretext of being done by God’s power and to His
glory.

“For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no
wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also
disguise themselves as servants of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their deeds” (2 Corinthians

We should expect false prophets to be accompanied by religious works, often unusual and spectacular, done
ostensibly in the name of God. Satan willingly gives the glory to God in such cases, so long as men give their
allegiance and obedience him.

If these religious activities are not the fruits of which the Master spoke, what are they? The Scriptures
frequently describe the fruits of the false prophets, so that we are left with little doubt as to what we should look for. I believe we can see the fruits of the false prophets falling into three categories.

(1) The first category of the fruits of the false prophet is their doctrine. False prophets speak from their own
delusion, not by divine command (Jeremiah 23:16,21,25; Ezekiel 13:2). They do not proclaim or defend God’s
word, but deny it (Jeremiah 23:17). In particular they deny unpleasant subjects such as impending judgment
(Jeremiah 6:14; 28:17; Ezekiel 13:10). They offer temporary and partial relief to pressing problems (Jeremiah
8:11). Mainly, they tell people precisely what they want to hear (1 Kings 22:8,13; 2 Timothy 4:3-4). Concerning
the way of salvation they deny the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ and they reject the work of Christ on the cross
(2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:2-3).

(2) The second category of the fruits of the false prophets is the effect of their teaching in the lives of men.
Invariably it leads to a rejection of God’s word, a rejection of biblical authority, a division among the saints
(Jeremiah 23:2,14) and a life of sensuality (2 Peter 2:2). They attempt to lead men away from the truth of the
gospel (Acts 13:8), and to deceive genuine Christians (Mark 13:22).

(3) Finally, there is the fruit of the false teachers as evidenced in their own moral character. They are
easily distinguished by their pride (2 Peter 2:10), their greed (Jeremiah 8:10; Titus 1:11; 2 Peter 2:3,14) and
immorality (Jeremiah 23:11,14; 2 Peter 2:14). They are men dominated by the flesh (2 Peter 2:10,12; 3:3). They
prey upon the weak and the guilt-ridden (2 Timothy 3:6-7; 2 Peter 2:14,13). While they profess to know God,
by their deeds they deny Him (Matthew 7:22-23; 2 Timothy 3:5; Titus 1:16). While they delight in authority,
they refuse to submit to it (2 Peter 2:10).

It is not hard to determine that Jesus was speaking of many of the Jewish leaders as false prophets. Jesus
distinguished the teachings of Judaism from His interpretation of the Old Testament Law (Matthew 5:17-48).
He taught that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was insufficient to enter into His Kingdom
accused the Pharisees of externalism (Matthew 23:26; Luke 11:37-41). He pointed out their pride and arrogance (Luke 11:43, etc.). He exposed their greed and abuse of the afflicted (Matthew 23:14). They were men controlled by their appetites (Matthew 23:25).

I want you to get the full impact of our Lord’s words in verses 21-23. The implications here were absolutely amazing to our Lord’s audience. We hardly perceive it as we look back from our present comprehension of the person and work of Christ. Jesus clearly identified Himself as God, the Judge before Whom men must stand in the final judgment.

“Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in Your name and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’” (verse 22).

It is He Who will pronounce the final verdict and Who will sentence the false prophets to everlasting torment. There could be no clearer statement of the deity of Christ than is found in these verses.

(Adapted from URL: https://bible.org/seriespage/fatal-failures-religion-5-misdirected-effort-matthew-71-12)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Churches of my era led many to believe that Christians were morally superior people because we kept the rules. Obedience was compelled by fear of ostracism. Those whose lives did not match traditional standards of the church were shamed, shunned, or expelled. This was the mind-set I and many others of my generation grew up with. The result was a tendency to lump together the outright hypocrites (who should have known better) with the spiritually immature who stumbled back into sin. I abandoned my sense of moral superiority as I grew older. I still acknowledged the fact that there were people in my church who hypocritically hid their private sins. Some of these folks were the quickest to censor and condemn anyone they believed to be breaking the rules. Their legalistic orientation caused them to be more concerned with controlling the behavior of others rather than repenting of their own secret sins. But I distinguish them from fellow believers who stumble back into sin but then return to the Lord with repentance and humbled hearts. Rather than jump to judgement, I am determined to look to the fruit of repentance. Do I see the fruit of repentance? Do I see the fruit of the Spirit in spite of their past failings? Paul says there is no law against this fruit (Galatians 5:22, 23). Make no mistake: I still care about godly behavior. I care deeply about injustice. I seek to live to please my Lord. But I also know I will never live without any sin on this earth. I also realize that others are in the same condition. I regret having lived as a legalist, and I now attempt to live in such a way that my own fruit is founded on “a broken and contrite heart” (Psalm 51:17) in keeping with repentance (Matthew 3:8). Such a heart is yielded fully to God. Most assuredly, Philippians 3:13, 14 applies!

Concluding Thoughts from the Echoes Commentary

Jesus taught about the outward actions of believers. How do you perceive and treat those around you? Is your reputation one of constantly judging others or of being self-righteous? Or does your ministry to others reap a rich and fruitful harvest of souls?

Be Loving - Jesus wants Christians to show compassion to all kinds of people—period. Our love for others should be patient, kind, understanding, and long-suffering. At times, operating out of their own reasoning, believers lash out at the wrongdoing of others. They elevate themselves as if they have no shortcomings of their own.

Don't Judge - Jesus warned us to be careful about judging people. A person’s heart and motives are not always observable. It’s easier to put yourself in a superior role: "At least my sins are not as bad as yours." Jesus wants His disciples to remember God is a God of mercy and grace, and He can also mete out judgment, punishment, and wrath. Too often, when it comes to our own sins, we want God to dispense mercy, but when another commits a foolish act we want to see the Lord make them pay.

See the Log in Your Eye - Be careful in calling out the small offences of another person and completely overlooking your own. Jesus said, deal with your own sin first, and then you are in a better position to help someone else overcome their sins.
Wolves in Sheep's Clothing - Jesus also warned believers about false prophets, those who look like shepherds but are really wolves. These individuals are lying to themselves and others; they are looking for wealth, the life of ease, and prestige. A test of their beliefs is if they are humble and faithful to the truth of the Scriptures. Would those who know you best say you are critical and judgmental of others, or would they say you are someone who is constantly bringing others to Christ and helping them grow, no matter how difficult the task?