

Twisted Scripture

"Thou shall not judge"

Matthew 7:1 NIV

In Matthew chapter four, as Satan tried to get Jesus to break his forty-day fast by turning a rock into bread, Jesus responded by quoting Scripture, because there's power in the Word of God. Jesus said to Satan, *"Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."* He recognized that the real source of his strength - his life, his hope, his purpose, his calling, his mission - came directly out of the words that come from God. And, we have that same sure Word to empower our lives.

However, one of the biggest problems of the Church is that we have allowed God's incorruptible Word to be twisted and mangled beyond recognition - twisted in a way that robs it of its power, and makes Christianity appear to a hurting world as an incongruent, unrecognizable mess of conflicting philosophies, confusing contradictions, and of verses pulled out of context to be used as "silver bullets," to either absolve our own guilt or to excuse us from actually wrestling with the truth of the God of the universe.

The way we've allowed God's Word to be twisted and scriptures to be abused makes Christianity and the Bible appear like a grotesque eighties-rock band to the world and they go, *"I don't know if I want any of that."* But, it's time for the Church to say, *"We're not going to take it anymore. We're not going to allow Scripture to be misused, abused, twisted, distorted, perverted, and turned into something that God never said."*

Probably the most mangled, twisted, perverted, and weaponized verse in the entire Bible is at the very foundation of what our culture has become. It has turned us into a culture where we tolerate literally anything and everything except for Truth. We'll tolerate everything except for righteousness and a clear understanding of who God is. In fact, this verse has effectually replaced John 3:16 as the most known and most popular verse in the entire Bible. Unbelievers love to quote this verse. They love to quote this verse so we won't quote the rest of the Bible to them.

Matthew 7:1 says, *"Do not judge or you too will be judged."* And, for a lot of people, that's the silver-bullet verse to shut down all conversation, all debate, and all identification of what's *really* going on and of anything that might actually be true. It's almost like it has become the "talk-to-the-hand" verse. *Judge not or you will be judged.* It's the in-your-face verse. *"Back up! Don't judge me or you'll be judged."* In other words, *"You do you and I'll do me and God will just leave us alone."* Right? Isn't that what it's saying? Maybe not.

The paralyzing misuse of this verse has done four things. Number one, it has silenced moral clarity. It has caused believers to fear that if they call something sin, then they'll be labeled "*judgmental*." The second thing is, it's made discernment seem un-loving. Because, in modern culture, we've redefined love and labeled it "affirmation." In other words, if we don't affirm and approve of anything and everything that anybody on the planet wants to do, then we are unloving and judgmental - and it shuts Christianity down completely.

The third thing it does is, it produces *passive* Christianity. Believers become convinced that our only responsibility is to just mind our own business. *"Just be nice. Just mind our own business, because surely, if we stick our nose in anybody else's business in any way, no matter how we do it, then that just means we're being judgmental. And Jesus said, 'Do not judge.' Right?"* The fourth thing is, it has confused actual biblical humility with moral relativism. In the Bible, true humility will cause a person to say, *"You know, I'm a sinner too, and I need grace."* False humility will cause people to say, *"You know, because I'm imperfect, I can never say anything else is wrong. Because I'm not perfect, I can't say anything is wrong."*

Then what happens is, nobody says *anything* is wrong. And when nothing is *wrong*, everything becomes right. And right becomes wrong becomes right - and right becomes wrong. And confusion and twisting and perversion takes place. And the Church fades into the irrelevant background - powerless and ineffective. The irony is, the people that make these very statements about this verse are "judging" when they say them. They're judging *us* and the way that we've interpreted the Bible and say, *"If you don't interpret this the way I interpret it, then you are judged."*

It's impossible *not* to judge. The only question is, how will we judge? *We're going to judge. Everybody's going to judge.* But *how* will we judge? Will we judge in a way that God has designed or will we come up with our own perverted, twisted way to judge things that seems right but is actually wrong? When a Major League Baseball team in San Francisco told their players to wear LGBTQ rainbows on their hats, some of them refused and put "Genesis 3" on them instead. They didn't do it out of a mean spirit or to condemn anybody, they said, *"If it comes down to whether or not we obey men or obey God, we have no choice, we've got to obey God."*

Just like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednigo when they were told, *"You must bow down to this idol - this false god, this false ideology - or be thrown into the fire."* And they replied, *"Judge for yourself whether it's right for us to obey you or obey God, but we've got to honor God."* And they were thrown into the fire. Thank God for some men who were willing to let it cost them something, not to hate, but to simply stand up and actually believe what they say they believe out in the open. But according to the twisting and the mangling of this verse, then they violated Matthew 7:1. *But did they?* Remember, context is king. And the best way to interpret what a Bible verse is saying - what Scripture is saying - is to look at what the rest of Scripture is saying.

Truth can easily be distorted and weaponized and turned into un-truth if we take something and isolate it from everything *else* that's in the Bible. If we take the verse in Luke 9:60 by itself that says, *"Let the dead bury their own dead,"* Cool. *"So, we started a brand new cemetery, but the only problem is we're having trouble recruiting volunteers."* How about Matthew 6:34 that says, *"Don't think about tomorrow."* Awesome. *"I'm selling my 401k when I get home and I'm canceling all my other retirement planning. I'm racking up my credit cards because I'm just doing what Jesus said."* How about Matthew 5:48 that says, *"Be perfect."* We're starting a new class here at the Bridge called "Stop Making Mistakes" because that's what it says, right? Surely, it means what it says, *right?* That obviously sounds silly and ridiculous, so why do we apply that same kind of logic to a verse like Matthew 7:1?

Matthew 7:1-2 AMP

"Do not judge and criticize and condemn [others unfairly with an attitude of self-righteous superiority as though assuming the office of a judge], so that you will not be judged [unfairly]. For just as you [hypocritically] judge others [when you are sinful and unrepentant], so will you be judged; and in accordance with your standard of measure [used to pass out judgment], judgment will be measured to you."

What is Jesus actually coming against here? In the chapter right before Matthew 7, Jesus is railing on the hypocritical Pharisees. He spent an entire chapter dealing with hypocrisy from a group of religious guys who refused to let the light shine on them, but were happy to shine it on anybody else for even the smallest things - accusing them. Jesus says, *"Don't play that. That's not how we do this."* He's coming against hypocrisy. He's forbidding *hypocritical, self-righteous* judgment that stems from an attempt to deflect attention away from oneself or to justify oneself.

That type of judgment is motivated not by a desire to love or to help anyone. It's motivated by a desire to condemn them with finality and a hope that they get punished. Jesus said, *"That's not what I'm talking about. That's not what you're to do."* He's warning about this - not to excuse oneself from judgment while proceeding to judge and critique others. Why? Because "wrong" judgment wants somebody to be *guilty*. It wants them to be *punished*. It wants them to be condemned. And if we're honest, we've all been in that moment. We said, *"Man, I hope they get what they deserve."*

That's actually what Jesus is talking about - that spirit right there. But there is a type of judgment that's *correct*. It seeks *vindication* for the other person. It hopes for them to receive mercy and grace from God. The righteous type of judgment does all of that. This is where we've gone wrong. We want to have mercy on people, but we feel like the only way to have mercy on them is to throw Truth out of the picture to do it. And Jesus is saying, *"No, no, no. This goes nowhere. This stays in the middle of the conversation, and mercy and love and grace is what laces and wraps all of it."*

This is so important. Despite Jesus warning against judging wrongly, unrighteously, and unfairly, there are way more verses in the Bible that command us *to* exercise judgment - that command us to discern between right and wrong, to evaluate, and to rebuke - than there are verses that warn us *against wrong* judgment. In fact, there's over one-hundred passages in the Bible that command us *to* exercise judgment correctly. *Correctly*. In the twisting of Scripture, we've thrown the baby out with the bathwater. In Matthew 7:15, Jesus says, *"Beware of false prophets."* And then he says, *"You can identify them."* What does that mean? To judge, to call it out, to say, *"Here's what's we have going on here."* You can identify them how? By their *fruit*. We can identify people by their *actions*. Jesus says, *"Do not judge by appearance superficially, arrogantly, but judge fairly and righteously."* There is a *correct* way.

Ephesians 5:8 says that we are not just to avoid evil, but to *identify* evil and expose it. How are we going to do that if we don't judge? 1Thessalonians chapter 5 says we are to evaluate, test, distinguish, and discern between right and wrong, and not accept everything uncritically. Philippians 1:9, it says that we are to love other people, but that love must be coupled with discernment and good, correct, accurate, righteous judgment. In 2 Timothy 4:2, Paul is talking to young Timothy and says, *"You, as a preacher of the word, are to show people in what ways their lives are wrong and convince them, rebuking and correcting, warning and urging and encouraging them, being unflagging and inexhaustible in patience and teaching."*

He's *commanding* him to do this, not to see somebody punished, but because he loves people so much and wants them to know God, and to be who they were created to be. That doesn't always generate applause and approval, but it doesn't mean that we pull back and go, *"Well, I'm just going to mind my own business then."* It's not *if* you judge, it's *how*. We use the same standard of measure by which Jesus defeated the attack of Satan in his life. But the effectiveness of the American Church has diminished because we've given up the very thing that can bring life and help and transformation into people's lives. Jesus said, *"Whatever measure or standard of measure you use in judgment, that's the measure that will be measured back to you."*

What's the measurement that we're looking for in righteous judgment? There's two elements to righteous judgment. The first is grace. Grace seeks a way *out* for people. It seeks *hope* for people. It seeks life and love and transformation for people. It doesn't seek death and condemnation. The other element of righteous judgment is truth - grace and truth mixed together - married with one another. Jesus didn't give us an invitation to rewrite the standards and the definition of sin. It was him saying, *"When you measure out judgment, it had better be the correct mixture of grace and truth, because whatever mixture of those two you use with others, that's what God's going to use with you."*

Truth shines the light of the reality of the real condition that we're all in, and then grace comes and brings the healing and the hope and the forgiveness, the salvation and the transformation that doesn't *leave* us there. It's grace and truth - the elements of correct righteous judgment. Jesus is not promising to loosen the standards for us if we loosen the standards for other people. That's the way people have mangled that verse. *"Hey, I'm not going to hold you to account and then hopefully God won't hold me to account."*

There are two extremes. One extreme is *"You're condemned. Be punished. Go to hell."* The other extreme is, *"You're fine. Jesus loves you. You don't need to change a thing. Come just like you are. Stay just like you are. It'll all be fine."* Both are lies. Both are extremes. Both are selfish on our part. It's pure selfishness that leads me to condemn somebody to hell. It's also pure selfishness to lie to somebody's face and tell them, *"Hey, you're just fine,"* when we know that their life is in clear violation of the very scripture that says they're accountable to both. The narrow path in the middle is to expose our own heart to the Lord in humility first and let him shine the light of truth on our lives and our souls. After we've done that, in the same spirit of humility and love, we bring truth and grace to the people in our lives. Not truth or grace, but truth and grace.

Matthew 7:3-5 NLT

"And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying to your friend, 'Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye."

What's Jesus saying here? He's not excusing specs as if they're no big deal. But he's saying something has to happen in the correct order. Jesus is saying, first we have to let God deal with it so that we can see God crying out to us and saying, *"Let me remove the log and this will all change."* Jesus isn't saying, *"Hey, you're messed up. They're messed up. So y'all leave each other alone because you're all messed up."* He's saying, *"Hey, I deal with messed up things. I remove logs. I remove specks. I remove whatever's in your eye. I'll remove it."* He's saying, *"Stop ignoring the need to let God deal with you. Finally get honest with him. Finally, be real with God. Finally admit the sin and the need that you have."*

And the very amazing Great Physician will come and he will do surgery on us and remove that log. Then we will see clearly enough to help other people. And we'll have a testimony to go with it, saying, *"God helped me. He can help you. God loved me in a way I could have never imagined. He can love you, too. And I love you too much to leave you where you are, in what you're in, because I know where it leads."* This is righteous judgment and we need to do both and in the right order.

The prophet Nathan came to King David one day, right after David had blown it big time. He had an adulterous affair with Bathsheba, who was married to another man in his army. And to cover it up, David had her husband sent to the front lines of the battle so that he would be killed, and David was carrying around this "log." And the prophet Nathan came to him and said, *"There was a poor man who had one little ewe lamb that he loved like his own daughter. His family loved the little lamb and it would sleep in the same area that the family slept. And a rich man with many flocks and herds had a visitor that he wanted to feed, but rather than slaughtering one of his own, he went to the poor man and he took his only ewe lamb and killed it for his guest saying, 'Here's lunch for you.' "*

When David heard Nathan tell this story, he was incensed and immediately a spirit of condemning judgment rose up in him and he said, *"He needs to be killed right now! Where is this man? I'm going to kill him today."* And what did Nathan say to David next? He said, *"You are that man."* Plank check. Log check! But, David didn't make excuses. He didn't run away. He didn't defend himself. What did David do? He repented in dust and ashes because he realized what was *really* going on. Sometimes the thing we're harshest about in other people is the very thing God's trying to deal with in us.

The thing we're most prone to jump to judgment and condemnation on somebody else about, is actually something stuck in our own heart that God wants to pull out. And David repented. What's interesting is, God was far more merciful to him than David was ready to be on the rich man in the story. David wanted to *kill* the man, but God said, *"I'm not going to kill you."* He had consequences, yes, but God was more gracious to David than David was about to be to this fictional man.

Hebrews 5:14 NKJV

"But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern [judge] both good and evil."

The mark of spiritual maturity is somebody who's so thoroughly filled with this Word that their spiritual senses are exercised and sensitized to be able to clearly differentiate between right and wrong, good and evil, and truth and lies in a way and in a capacity that allows them to love and help other people. If we can't do that, we're like a baby that still has to eat mushy peas. This is what we're like as Christians when we have the inability to exercise righteous judgment because we're not skilled in this Word and we haven't let it penetrate our hearts so that we can help other people. That means being led by the Holy Spirit of, not just *what* to judge, but how and when to do it, because there's a right time, a right way, a right context, and a right relationship, where the grace of God will enable and empower us to actually reach the heart of another person.

Part of us exercising our senses by being in God's presence and being in his Word is developing our relationship with the Holy Spirit so that he can literally guide us into moments where, yes, we're going to have to speak up at some moment and tell people the truth that makes us uncomfortable to say, but his grace is going to be on it. It's going to penetrate *their* heart because it's going to be motivated by his heart, which is to love them and help them, not to condemn them and see them be punished. We can evaluate, discern, and identify something that's sin, something that's wrong, something that's a violation of God's standards without judging another person in a condemning way.

1 Corinthians 6:3 AMPC

"Do you not know also that we [Christians] are to judge the [very] angels and pronounce opinion between right and wrong [for them]? How much more then [as to] matters pertaining to this world and of this life only!"

In Christ, we don't judge the *person*, but we can judge something that will *destroy* them. We've got to be someone who regularly gets before the Lord and says, *"God, reveal any wicked thing in me. Show me any plank, speck, or stick stuck in my eye that I haven't been able to see. Help me see it. Remove it. Pour out Your grace and Your truth on me so that I can see and discern my own heart accurately so that I can be an example to others."* Also, we demonstrate our care for other people *practically*. We get invested in people's lives. We get in relationships with people. That's the basis and context by which we gain moments and opportunities led by the Holy Spirit to speak the truth because of love - not from a distance, but up close and personal.

Then we tell the truth because of love laced with grace just like the Father - patient but potent, precise but done prayerfully, and in relationship with the Holy Spirit. At the end of the day, we don't represent ourselves or our own standards. We represent God and his standards. We appeal to brothers and sisters on behalf of the King. We don't sit in the King's place. We've got to be careful not to confuse conviction with final judgment which involves punitive penalties and finality. But conviction is actually the work of the Holy Spirit in and through God's people, the Church, because he lives in *us*. The question is, will we be a people of God who are committed enough to him, courageous enough, brave enough, and truly loving enough to let him do his work in us, so that we're equipped and able to help a world who can't see until somebody helps them with what's in their eye. *This is Jesus' heart.*

Prayer - *Father, in Jesus name, we come in a spirit of humility, and we ask You to examine each of our hearts, Lord, if there be any wicked way in us, that You would shine the light of Truth on it, and that You would wrap it in the grace of Your love to help and to redeem us right now. Lord, would You remove every plank, every stick, every speck that's being surrendered to You. Holy Spirit, come and do the transforming, life-giving, freeing work that only You can do to every log and brick and stick and speck - everything that separates us and blocks us from fellowship with You and the ability to see clearly. We give it to You by faith. In Jesus' name. Amen*