



Those who want to judge righteously regularly seek inspiration through prayer.

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“Judge Not, That Ye Be Not Judged”: An Approach to Teaching Matthew 7

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K *ri*no is a widely nuanced Greek verb. Depending on the context, it can be variously translated as *select, prefer, pass judgment, express an opinion, criticize, condemn, think, consider, decide, propose, or intend*.¹ All these meanings share the common denominator of exercising agency, with the making of decisions, either mentally or judicially. In the King James Version of the Sermon on the Mount, the verb is translated simply as “judge” in the Savior’s commandment “judge not, that ye be not judged” (Matthew 7:1). In light of the varied meanings of *krino*, the Savior’s admonition to the multitude gathered to hear his Sermon on the Mount raises some provocative questions. Did our Lord mean to prohibit us from making any kind of judgment?² Was he asking us to forgo the use of our precious agency, which has been afforded us at such a great cost and is so vital to our learning and progression? Or did he intend to proscribe only moral judgments or judging of others? In God’s eyes, do any of us have a right to judge?

Latter-day Saints are fortunate to be able to turn to the Joseph Smith Translation for better understanding of the commandment, for it clarifies, “Judge not *unrighteously*, that ye be not judged: *but judge righteous judgment*”

(Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 7:2; emphasis added). Thus we understand that the Savior was not asking us to be totally nonjudgmental or indecisive, but rather to let our judgments and decisions be based upon righteous principles—an observation that leads to another important question: what is the difference between a righteous and an unrighteous judgment or decision?

Inviting our students to carefully look for answers to that question in Matthew chapter 7 can be an effective approach to studying and teaching this important passage from the Sermon on the Mount. It can help them discover and consider the doctrines taught therein from a new perspective and in an insightful context. It can help them understand that rather than being a prohibition against judging, this portion of the Sermon on the Mount is a beautiful treatise on how to judge appropriately. Below, I present seven principles of righteous judgment that can be gleaned from the Savior's teachings in Matthew 7 that a teacher may wish to include in such an approach.

Principle 1: Judge with a Clear Eye

Following his commandment to judge righteously, Jesus asked some instructive questions, "Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?" (Matthew 7:3–4). The imagery is graphic. How indeed can we see to remove a small twig or straw, a mote from another's eye, if our own is impaled with a large timber?³

Many vices can introduce tiny motes and even hefty beams into our judging eyes. Sin, jealousy, anger, pride, greed, prejudice, and selfishness are a few that can cloud our vision and distort our perspective, yielding unrighteous decisions and poor judgment. I recall a young father who once fell into such a trap. He had just asked his toddler to stop some annoying behavior. Deciding to explore the limits of defiance, as young children occasionally do, the youngster belligerently said, "No!" Upset by the response, the agitated father got hold of the child, pulled her face right up to his, and menacingly warned, "Don't you *ever, ever* tell me no again!" and then added, "Do you want a spanking?"

Now what was the child to answer? In light of the threat, she certainly did not dare say no again, and the fear and tears on her face indicated she did not want to say yes either. The upset and irrational father had placed his

sobbing and confused child in an impossible predicament. Later, when he was in control of his emotions, he was embarrassed by how silly his heated words sounded and the way he had decided to handle the situation. He learned that we rarely make disciplinary decisions appropriately or righteously with the beam of anger in our eyes.

The Savior gave simple counsel to help us avoid such mistakes. He reasoned, "Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye" (Matthew 7:5). His words invite us to reflect carefully and evaluate the clarity of our vision as we use our agency. He asks us to defer our decisions and conclusions until we have repented of sins that might impinge on our judgment, overcome our own anger, and conquered our pride, jealousy, and selfishness. As we remove such motes and beams, we make place for patience, empathy, charity, reason, and inspiration to inform our decisions. Judgments and decisions made under the influence of these virtues are far more likely to be righteous and in harmony with the will of our Heavenly Father. Elder Dallin H. Oaks summarizes the principle nicely: "A righteous judgment will be guided by the Spirit of the Lord, not by anger, revenge, jealousy, or self-interest."⁴ To judge righteously, we must have a clear eye.

Principle 2: Consider Others

Christ next directed, "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you" (Matthew 7:6). Again the imagery is instructive. We can visualize the foolishness of one placing precious pearls before swine. We can imagine the swine curiously snuffling the treasure and, after discovering it had no value in satisfying their appetites, carelessly trampling the pearls into the mire. Christ further warned that the swine so disturbed might then turn to do harm to one who had bothered them with something they deemed worthless. We could hardly blame the ignorant pigs for their disregard or any damage done in such a case. Rather, the fault would belong to the one who unwisely cast the pearls without considering how they might be treated.

The Joseph Smith Translation indicates that the particular pearls to which Christ was referring in this dialogue are the "mysteries of the kingdom" (JST, Matthew 7:10). Accordingly, stewards of the mysteries—those who have been taught gospel truths by revelation, reason, and covenant—should carefully consider their audience in determining when, where, and how to

share their understanding. Missionaries teaching the gospel to investigators, parents discussing principles of morality with their children, and priesthood leaders serving as judges in Israel (see D&C 64:40; 107:65–75) are among those who should carefully consider the spiritual readiness, receptiveness, and worthiness of those they teach, judge, and counsel.

In a broader sense, the Savior's teachings about properly sharing the pearls of our faith help us understand that righteous judgment is not selfish. Rather, those who use their agency properly take into consideration how others will understand or be affected by their choices. Most of us know someone who has sought license for making poor choices or who has tried to avoid censure for bad judgment by protesting, "It's nobody's business what I do! I am only hurting myself!" Those who understand that the basic unit of exaltation is the family (see D&C 131:1–4; 132:19–22) can readily see the spiritual myopia of such reasoning. Each of our choices affects those who love us and those whose eternal happiness is linked with our own. Righteous judgment considers others.

Principle 3: Seek Inspiration

Ignorance, inexperience, misunderstanding, and naïveté can lead us to make bad decisions. The Savior's next words offer a remedy. He exhorts, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Matthew 7:7). Wise individuals ask many questions of knowledgeable people before making decisions. Elder Oaks admonishes us to "refrain from judging until we have adequate knowledge of the facts."⁵ Christ's simple invitation reminds us that we need not make important choices without divine direction as well. When we face difficult decisions, we can receive inspiration, perspective, and knowledge from one who is omniscient if we will but discipline ourselves to ask and learn to recognize answers.

The scriptures contain many examples of poor choices made by good people simply because they did not bother to ask. Joshua was deceived by the Gibeonites because he "asked not counsel at the mouth of the Lord" (Joshua 9:14). Righteous King Hezekiah naively showed the wealth of his kingdom to greedy Babylonians because he did not first seek direction from the Lord's prophet (see Isaiah 39:2–7). The Jaredites spent four years sitting on the beach because their prophet failed to "call upon the name of the Lord" (Ether 2:14).

Likewise, the scriptures contain many examples of righteous decisions and judgments that were made because people made the effort to ask of God.

Moses overcame his fears as he discussed his worries and concerns with the Lord (see Exodus 3:11–4:17). The Apostle Paul changed the course of his life because he asked, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:6). Lehi learned of the fate of Jerusalem and saved his family because he "prayed unto the Lord, yea, even with all his heart" (1 Nephi 1:5). Christ set a remarkable example for us as he counseled with God all night before choosing the twelve who were to be Apostles (see Luke 6:12–16).

As Jesus spoke on the mount, he promised, "Every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened" (Matthew 7:8). He further reasoned that just as an earthly father is anxious to give to his children, our Heavenly Father will impart "to them that ask him" (Matthew 7:11). Those who judge righteously regularly seek such inspiration.

Principle 4: Judge with Empathy

The Savior captured the essence of empathy with the next principle of righteous judgment that he presented: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them" (Matthew 7:12). This "golden rule" instructs that as we make judgments and decisions, we should extend to others the same justice and mercy, the same punishment and reward, the same forgiveness and accountability that we would wish for ourselves. With the fatal words "Thou art the man," the prophet Nathan taught the adulterous and murderous King David that God condemns those who would hold others to a higher standard of moral conduct than they are willing to live themselves (see 2 Samuel 12:1–14). Likewise, the unmerciful servant was delivered to the tormentors for his refusal to forgive a small debt of a fellow servant after pleading for and receiving forgiveness for a great one (Matthew 18:23–35).

Whether we are deciding whether to accept an apology, considering hiding a flaw in a home we are selling, or designing discipline for a wayward child, we must let empathy inform our choices if we wish to judge righteously. Christ explained how fundamental this practice is to his gospel as he declared, "For this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

Principle 5: Choose the Right

As a boy, I delighted to read the humorous billboards put up along the highway to advertise a particularly popular chain of service stations of that day.

The amusing quips the advertisements offered helped to break the monotony of long drives. One of my favorites read, “Lost? Keep going! You’re making good time anyway!” The absurdity of someone choosing to speed down the highway simply to make good time, even though they were likely traveling farther from their destination, always put a smile on my face. Centuries earlier, Jesus used similar imagery as he taught another principle of righteous decision making in the Sermon on the Mount. He admonished, “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matthew 7:13–14).

The Savior’s counsel instructs us to consider carefully where the paths we choose to follow will lead us. It advises us to choose the right path, not the easiest. Just as it would be foolish to speed down a wrong road simply to make good time, so too is it foolish to persist in pursuing a wrong choice simply because it is the easy choice. Indeed, by God’s design, it seems the right paths to happiness are frequently not the easiest to follow. They often require effort and sacrifice to follow. It was easier for the man who received one talent to simply hide it rather than labor to increase it (see Matthew 25:14–30). It was easier for Jonah to attempt to flee from the Lord than deliver God’s message to Nineveh (see Jonah 1:1–15). It was easier for David to have Uriah murdered than to admit to adultery (see 2 Samuel 11). It was easier for Balaam to betray Israel than give up Balak’s promised reward (see Numbers 22:1–25:9; Revelation 2:14; 2 Peter 2:15). All these easy choices eventually led to rebuke and sorrow.

But Joseph made the hard choice to obey God rather than give in to the advances of Potiphar’s wife (see Genesis 39:7–20). Ruth made the hard choice to care for her widowed mother-in-law rather than abandon her and her newfound faith for an easier life (see Ruth 1:1–18). Daniel chose to face the lions’ den rather than surrender the privilege of prayer (see Daniel 6:4–28). Peter, James, John, and Andrew straightway left their nets, forsaking the security of their livelihoods to follow the Master. All these hard choices led to some trials and sacrifice, followed by great rewards and blessings. So too can we expect to find happiness at the end of our paths and often along the way if the question of what is right rather than what is easiest dictates our choices.

Principle 6: Consider the Fruits

As the Savior continued his teachings on the mount, he described how to identify false prophets and, in the process, presented another principle of righteous judgment:

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.

Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?

Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.

A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. (Matthew 7:15–20)

In this context, fruits can be understood to be the works or offerings of a plant or a prophet—the product or results of their labors. Just as such fruits can be used to identify true and false prophets, so can they help us identify good and bad judgments or decisions.

Evaluating the fruits of our choices requires us to look far ahead to the likely outcomes of our decisions. If we fail to do so, we may make short-term decisions that undermine long-term goals. As the popular motivational speaker and author Zig Ziglar succinctly summarized, “The chief cause of failure and unhappiness is trading what you want most for what you want now.”⁶ So the hungry Esau sold his birthright for a meal of pottage, thereby trading his future inheritance for a handful of lentils (see Genesis 25:29–34). Ananias and Sapphira deceptively “kept back part of the price” of a sold possession rather than truthfully consecrating all as they had committed, thereby sacrificing their integrity on the altar of transitory wealth (see Acts 5:1–11; D&C 76:50–55; 84:37–38). Judas betrayed his Master and, in the process, traded his chance for exaltation to temporally hold thirty pieces of silver (see Matthew 27:3–5; John 17:12). By failing to consider the fruits of their choices, each, in their myopic stupor, traded what they wanted most for what they wanted at the moment.

In contrast, Joseph of Egypt looked ahead during the years of plenty and determined to prepare for the years of famine (see Genesis 41:46–57). Paul surrendered a life of relative comfort and prestige to follow the Savior, declaring, “I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ

Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ” (Philippians 3:8; see also 2 Corinthians 11:24–28). Jesus condescended from his glory as Jehovah to assume the sufferings of mortality that he might perform the infinite Atonement and redeem us for eternity. Each understood the law of the harvest—if we sow good seed, even when such sowing may require great sacrifice, we will eventually reap precious fruit. Good decisions, righteous judgments, require that we consider the culminating fruits of our choices.

Principle 7: Align with God’s Will

As he continued to teach about false prophets, Jesus explained, “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). From this caution we can gather another principle of righteous judgment. As we make decisions, we must consider whether our choices are in harmony with the Lord’s will and, if not, adjust accordingly. Indeed, Christ went on to explain, even works that appear to be good may in fact be evil if they are not done with God’s blessing or according to his plan. Jesus warned, “Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Matthew 7:22–23). Apparently righteous judgments must have righteous motives, the primary purpose of which must be to accomplish the will of our Heavenly Father.

The Joseph Smith Translation of this passage adds another layer to our understanding: “And many will say unto me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name; and in thy name cast out devils; and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I say, *Ye never knew me*; depart from me ye that work iniquity (JST, Matthew 7:32–33; emphasis added). The change from “I never knew you” to “ye never knew me” suggests that the very process of doing works and making decisions that align with God’s will helps us come to know him. In his beautiful intercessory prayer, Jesus taught the eternal significance of knowing him. “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3). Thus learning to make righteous judgments—decisions that help us know and become like Christ—is a vital part of our path to eternal life.

Conclusion

The Savior closed the Sermon on the Mount with a promise that inspires hope and a warning that demands our attention:

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock:

And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.

And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand:

And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it. (Matthew 7:24–27)

Our students can find comfort in this assurance, knowing that as we not only hear but also follow Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, we will be able to weather the storms and floods of life. Among those anchoring teachings are the principles of righteous judgment he taught. Surely if we judge and make decisions with clear and empathetic eyes, seeking inspiration from God and aligning our will with his, considering the long-term fruits of our choices and how our decisions affect others, all while being willing to make difficult decisions if they are right, then we are building upon a sure foundation. We will make righteous judgments that will bless rather than condemn us. We will be using the precious gift of agency in the way God designed. Helping our students discover, understand, and apply such principles can be an effective, engaging, and exciting way to teach Matthew chapter 7. **RE**

Notes

1. Fredrick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 567–69.
2. The Book of Mormon account clarifies that this portion of the sermon was directed to the general multitude gathered to hear Christ’s words at the temple in Bountiful (see 3 Nephi 13:1–2), while the Joseph Smith Translation indicates that these are the words the Savior wanted his disciples to teach the people (JST, Matthew 7:1). In either instance, it is clear that the instructions were intended for all and thus can appropriately be understood as counsel to those who wish to follow Christ today as well.
3. The definition of a mote as “a dry twig or straw” and a beam as a “timber” comes from James Strong, “A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek New Testament,” in *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Royal Publishers, 1979), 24, 39.
4. Dallin H. Oaks, “‘Judge Not’ and Judging,” *Ensign*, August 1999, 9.
5. Oaks, “Judge Not,” 10.
6. Zig Ziglar, *Zig Ziglar’s Little Book of Big Quotes* (n.p., Ziglar Publishing), 14.