

Jesus, James, and Judgment

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Introduction.

In 2 Peter 3, Peter warns us that even though the Bible is inspired, it is not immune to misinterpretation. If we approach it with a lawless heart, we can distort it so that what ought to be a source of life becomes instead the source of our own destruction. It's not at all difficult to find examples of this Scriptural distortion everywhere in the religious world around us, where people just start messing with the Bible to get it to say what they want it to say.

Of all of the texts that outsiders love to misapply, there are none that see more ill use than Matthew 7:1-2. Folks love the first verse of this, especially. They may not know a thing about the Bible, they may never have set foot in a church building in their lives, but whenever anyone approaches them about Jesus, they know enough to parrot, "Judge not, lest you be judged." By this, they mean, "When you tell me that I'm a sinner, you're judging me, and Jesus doesn't want you doing that." Of course, by the way that they're interpreting the passage, they themselves are passing judgment, and so presumably they're headed for the same punishment as we are. Typically, they don't realize that, but they do think that they've found a way to keep people who have God's revelation to the world from telling anybody about it.

So. . . how do we deal with that? How do we deal with people who seem to know this one passage of Scripture but use it to keep from hearing any more? Even more than that, how do we integrate it into the way we live our lives? It doesn't make sense that Jesus intended this Scriptural snippet as a spiritual gag order, but how did He intend it? We can sort things out not just by looking at the words of Christ, but at the words of the Biblical author whose teachings have perhaps the most in common with Christ's—His own brother. Let's consider, then, Jesus, James, and judgment.

What Jesus Meant.

In addition to the logical contradictions, **THE PROBLEM WITH THE TEXT** being read to say that we aren't supposed to notice or point out sin in others is that it doesn't fit with the context, either the immediate context of the Sermon on the Mount or the broader context of Jesus' words generally. For example, look at a commandment that occurs just a few verses down in Matthew 7:6. Jesus here isn't talking about literal creatures and objects. This has nothing to do with jewelry and pigs. Instead, He's speaking in metaphor. He's telling us that we aren't supposed to teach the gospel to people who aren't going to appreciate it and are going to use it as an excuse to attack or belittle us. There are certainly people like that out there; many of us have met them. However, they don't typically wander around with giant glowing signs over their heads that say "I AM A PIG". The Holy Spirit does not whisper in our ears that Thus-and-Such is not to be trusted with the word. Yet Jesus obviously means for us to do something with this command. The only way that we can obey Him is by assessing the people around us, their behavior, and, most importantly, their previous reactions to the gospel, and concluding from that what is likely to happen if we try to teach them. In other words, this command requires us to evaluate others and judge them on what we see. Otherwise, it is nonsensical. Now, if that's the case, then unless Jesus slipped a gear five verses earlier, He cannot be forbidding us to judge in that sense.

If we stop there, we might think that the point of not judging others is that we reach our own conclusions about them, but then keep those conclusions to ourselves. The problem is that that doesn't line up with the teachings of Jesus either. Christianity is just not a keep-your-mouth-shut kind of faith. Look at a passage we've seen a lot recently, Matthew 28:19-20. The ultimate result of this passage is that we are commanded to teach others about everything Jesus and His apostles have taught us. This includes the specific commandments they are disobeying; sometimes, it **ESPECIALLY** includes those commandments. When John the Baptist saw that Herod had married his brother's wife, he didn't preach a long sermon on extortion. He said, "It is not lawful for you to have her." In our efforts to teach others, sooner or later, we will have to do the same. Jesus demands it. Therefore, such activity cannot be the judgment He condemns.

So then, if Jesus isn't talking about coming to conclusions about the behavior of others, if He isn't talking about telling others when they need to repent, what IS He talking about? What are **JESUS' TRUE CONCERNS**? When we put Matthew 7 and James 2 next to each other, it's evident that there are two behaviors that Jesus is targeting. The first is hypocrisy. Consider what Jesus continues on to say in Matthew 7:3-5. The hypocrite claims to love the law. He even instructs others that they must obey it in even the smallest detail. However, even while he says those things, he knowingly, willfully disregards the law in his own life whenever he pleases. People like this do incalculable damage to the cause of Christ. My grandfather on my mother's side went to church with my grandmother for decades, but he never obeyed the gospel. My mother asked him why once, and he said it was because of the hypocrites. You see, my grandfather was an insurance agent, and as is true somewhat today, many preachers in the church of Christ back then also sold insurance to make ends meet. According to my grandfather, those preachers engaged in all sorts of shady business practices, and he didn't want anything to do with a church where the preachers lived like that. On the day of judgment,

my grandfather will have to answer for his decisions, but you know what? So will those preachers. If indeed they preached the truth but lived a lie, by their standard of judgment, it will be measured back to them. If we willfully engage in hypocrisy, whether another soul ever finds out, God will know, and He will reward us accordingly.

That's the first way that judgment can be problematic. The second way is if we use our own standards, not God's, to judge others. Look at the words of James in James 2:2-4. Notice first of all that the situation that James describes is morally neutral. All other things being equal, there's nothing wrong with being either rich or poor. The Bible tells us that both rich and poor are equal in the eyes of God, so if we use God's judgments, we will treat them with equal consideration. However, when we let our own private standards override God's, when we treat the rich better than the poor because we like rich people better, that's when the trouble begins. At that point, we're no longer following the law. Instead, we're replacing it with our own law. We're saying, "God, I know You say that everybody is equal in Your eyes, but I don't care. I'm going to be nice to rich people and mean to poor people because I think the rich guy might help me out, but I don't think I can get anything out of the poor guy." That is when we become judges with evil motives. Of course, we can judge on other things besides money. We can say that we prefer one particular kind of sinner above another, or that one kind of service to God is more pleasing to us than another. Regardless, James condemns it all.

Application and Conclusion.

From that point James continues on to give us help in **APPLYING THE LAW**. He begins with the positive application in James 2:8. This is not where I, at least, intuitively expect James to go. If we have a double-standard problem, presumably the best way to fix it is by being more just. However, that's not the direction James heads. Instead, he tells us that we become less partial and judgmental by becoming more loving. This is certainly true in the realm of hypocrisy. If we truly love others, we won't be like the Pharisees and load them down with all sorts of religious burdens that we won't touch ourselves. If we truly love others, we won't give them an example of false religion that may well drive them away from Christ. Love can never be selfish; love can never be dishonest, and at its core, hypocrisy is both.

All of this is even more obvious in James' core application of partiality. *Agape* love, the love of Christianity, is not earned. Jesus didn't die on the cross for us because we deserved His love. Instead, *agape* is given to everyone, regardless of who they are and what they've done. When we choose to be partial instead, and favor one above another on the basis of our own criteria, we are rejecting *agape*. However, in both situations, if we judge others on the basis of the law, from a heart filled with love, we can be certain that we practicing the same judgment that He did, and He will be pleased.

That's the positive application. James gives us the negative application in James 2:9-11. This text is basically a reminder that even though we can be partial, the law isn't. Sometimes as Christians, we have a tendency to prefer the "don't" commandments to the "do" commandments. Avoiding the sins in the Bible is a black-and-white thing; either we went through the day without lying or we didn't, and if we didn't lie, then we can check off the "don't lie" box on our to-do list. The positive commands are harder. Loving our neighbor isn't a checklist kind of command. Love is on a sliding scale, and we only max out the scale when we love like Christ did. Obviously, that's not a point that any of us ever reach, so even if we can be satisfied with our progress at not lying, we always have room to improve at loving.

Even though that's true, even though love is harder, it's still something that God expects of us, and when we are partial, whether to ourselves or to someone else, it cannot be loving. It may be, as in the case of the hypocrite, that we're violating other commandments in addition to the commandment to love, but being unloving by itself is enough to convict us of sin. Once we cross that line, the entire weight of the law falls on us. As the text says, we are either law-keepers or law-breakers, and if we are law-breakers, the precise law broken doesn't matter. We are still guilty.

Following this, James comes at last to **OUR CONCLUSION**. It appears in James 2:12-13. In this, there are two important principles that we must extract. The first is that in whatever we say or do, we must keep in mind the law by which we will be judged. As we've seen already, this love includes even the command to judge others and speak accordingly. However, as we do that, we must take care that we don't drift into unrighteous judgment by forgetting the law. Ultimately, both hypocrisy and partiality represent this kind of forgetting. Both the hypocrite and the partial man have to go through the same kind of mental gymnastics. They convince themselves that they've outwitted God, or that the law doesn't really apply to them, or that something else is more important. Of course, none of those things are true. No matter what justifications we come up with, none of them will amount to a hill of beans on the day of judgment.

The second thing that we must remember is to be loving and to be merciful. Note first of all that this doesn't mean that we should be silent about the painful parts of the law that others need to hear. We don't have the right to edit the commandments of God. If we fail to point out sin in others, we only ensure that we will be lost along with them. However, in the things that we are allowed to control, in the way we teach others, in the way we live our lives generally, we must be a merciful people. We don't have the right to change the law, but we do have the right to forgive others ourselves, to treat them better than they deserve. If we neglect to do this, if we choose to be self-righteous and merciless instead, we can be certain that the day of judgment will be just as merciless to us. It's up to us to decide.