

Preacher's Pen points

Judging Others?



It seems the public debate over whether it is right or wrong to judge others will never go away. Many in our society hold the view that it is morally wrong to suggest that the beliefs of another are invalid or that the hope founded upon them is misplaced. One of the most commonly quoted verses in defense of the position is Jesus' emphatic statement of Matthew 7:1 "Judge not that you be not judged..." Consider Jesus' statement carefully in its context.

Theme of Jesus' Sermon

Jesus introduced the theme of his famous mountain message with this statement: "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:20). As He moves from subject to subject, it is clear that He is contrasting the teaching and practice of the scribes and Pharisees with the true principles of righteousness. In chapter 5 He contrasts their incorrect interpretations of the Law with the real principles of righteousness embodied in the Law and which would be the practice of His disciples. In chapter six He presents an alternative to two typical Pharisaic problems, ostentation and covetousness. In chapter seven the theme continues as he rebukes the attitude, common among Pharisees, that condemned others while living a far worse life (see v. 1-5).

Other statements of Jesus in the Gospels give us further insight into the practice of the Pharisees. Matthew 23 records a point-by-point exposé of Pharisaical "righteousness". Consider some of the things Jesus said about them:

- They said things and did not do them (v. 3).
- They tied up heavy loads and laid them on men's shoulders, but they themselves were unwilling to move them with so much as a finger (v. 4).
- They devoured widow's houses, even while they made long prayers to impress others (v. 14).
- They tithed of minor garden plants but left out the weightier matters of the Law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness (v. 23).
- They were inwardly full of robbery and self-indulgence" (v. 25).

"Judge not that you be not judged..." (Matthew 7:1)

You get the idea. While claiming moral superiority and condemning others, the Pharisees were themselves filled with all kinds of evil attitudes and neglect.

Jesus' Point!

Jesus' words to His disciples were intended to point out the hypocrisy of the practice of the scribes and Pharisees and urge his disciples to live differently. In this context, He is simply forbidding those with greater transgressions in their lives to condemn those with far less. This is the force of the exhortation, "Judge not!" To use Jesus' words to forbid the honest appraisal of the teaching or faith of another is to not only take this verse out of context, it is to make, God forbid, a hypocrite out of Jesus Himself! After all, the whole Sermon on this occasion was dedicated to pointing out the moral flaws and inconsistency in the teaching and practice of the scribes and Pharisees. Did Jesus violate His own teaching? Think about it!

—Johnny Felker