

## Matthew 7:1-6

# The Most (Mis)used Verse in the Bible

The most quoted verse in all the Bible is not John 3:16. It's not even Philippians 4:13. It is Matthew 7:1. Our overuse (and abuse) of this singular verse is a great example of what happens when we read the Bible with America in the forefront and 1<sup>st</sup> century Judea in the background. Let us try to understand what Jesus meant so that we can understand what Jesus means.

Jesus begins with the **Denouncement** (vv. 1). What does Jesus mean by "judge not." Most assume Jesus is against Moral Evaluations. In Monopoly, there is a handy card you can win called a "Get out of Jail Free" card. This verse is often used in a similar way. It's used as a weapon of judgment against threats of judgment. When we don't like what someone has said to us, we play this card.

This approach has several problems. First, we all make necessary moral judgements. Who do you let babysit your children and how do you decide? You make moral judgments. Imagine if a sketchy looking stranger asked for your phone number or email password. Are you going to give it? Secondly, Jesus repeatedly makes judgements. Look closely at the Sermon on the Mount especially in Matthew 5:19, 48, 6:1, 2, 5, 16, 7:21-23. Later, Jesus makes clear judgements in Matthew 15:7-9 and the temple cleansing in Matthew 21. It is odd to suggest that Jesus condemns all moral evaluations when he repeatedly does the same. Finally, Jesus demands discernment (see Matthew 7:15-16) which requires moral evaluations.

Ultimately, weaponizing this verse is an act of judgment. Ironically, "don't judge me!" is a judgment that you were being judged. It comes with condemnation.

The real meaning of this single verse is that Jesus condemns hypocrisy. The dominant concern of Jesus, thus far, has been how religious hypocrisy robs us of deep intimacy with God and from living the blessed life. Repeatedly, Jesus has had the religious elites in mind. In Matthew 5:17-48, Jesus shows how wickedness stems from our hearts. Likewise, in Matthew 6:1-18, Jesus shows how righteousness stems from the heart.

Jesus is concerned how legalism fuels hypocrisy. While condemning violence, the hypocrite has hate in his own heart. While condemning adultery, he has lust in his heart. While praising his own public piety, he is inwardly corrupt. This is a dominant theme throughout the Gospels, especially in Matthew (see, for example, the seven woes).

Although it is easy to condemn the Pharisees of Jesus's day, we could easily look into our own spiritual mirrors. Are we guilty of complaining about public discourse while leaving nasty comments behind an anonymous username? Or do we ever say, "I'll pray for you," but never pray? Do we ever complain about the state of marriage and the family culturally while not prioritizing ourselves? Do we ever brag about our church attendance while ignoring our treatment of the waitress immediately after? Religious and moral hypocrisy severely stains the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, Jesus **Defines** judgmental hypocrisy (vs. 2-5). Jesus does not denounce judgment without also defining it for us. To judge someone by a certain standard is to invite others to judge you by that same standard. The standard by which we make judgments is applied to us. This is the practice of humbly applying our moral standards first to ourselves.

Jesus then illustrates his definition by offering a parable of two men. One has a small speck in his eye whereas the other man suffers from an entire tree trunk in his (vs. 3-5). This parable is a great example of Jesus's use of humor and exaggeration. What is missed in this brief parable is how Jesus doesn't condemn helping the man with the speck but insisting on removing the trunk *first*. It would be uncaring to ignore the man with the speck, but due to the other man's more serious condition, he is unable to help.

Remove what is in your eye, Jesus demands. Do what is necessary to clear your sight so that together we can all see better. Indifference to sin is unacceptable especially in our own lives. A similar example can be found on airplanes where we are instructed to first put the mask over our face before doing the same for those around us. If you want to make the world a better place, prioritize your own growth in holiness. Doing so allows us to see better and to serve better.

Ultimately, this passage is often misused when we eagerly apply it to others. Perhaps the best use of it is to look in our spiritual mirror. Let us humbly examine our own heart and lives and begin the important work of removing what's in our eyes, what corrupts our hearts, and stains our souls. When we all do that necessary work, we'll be ready to grow closer to Christ with the help of each other.