

“A Common Misunderstanding”

G.K. Chesterton once wrote, “Do not be so open-minded that your brains fall out.” I’d like to suggest that Christians often check their brains at the door because of a common misunderstanding of Jesus’s teaching.

One of the most misunderstood passages in the Bible is Matthew 7:1: “Judge not, that you be not judged.” Many interpret this verse to mean, “You shouldn’t condemn anyone.” One problem with this interpretation is that it is a very narrow interpretation of the word “judge” as “condemn”. Instead, there is a wide range of meanings of the word “judge”, including “to evaluate”, “to discern” or “to decide”. For example, the use of “judge” in Psalm 50:4 means an evaluation that brings about a just act.

It is further misunderstood as a suspension of all evaluation. Yet, this contradicts what Jesus will say about not throwing “your pearls before pigs” (Matt. 7:6). Jesus does not advocate a suspension of judgment between right and wrong, or between good and evil. So, what is Jesus teaching?

Jesus is teaching that his disciples ought not to judge unfairly. He explains, “For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you” (v. 2). To judge unfairly means to use a different standard to judge another than the one used to judge your own self. Jesus does not teach that we get rid of the standard. He upholds the standard and calls disciples to the same standard.

Jesus explains that his disciples must be aware of their own blindness, confess it, and confront their brothers and sisters. Disciples must admit the log in their own eye (3). By calling his disciples hypocrites, Jesus warns against the appearance of godliness (4). Righteousness requires consistency between the heart and action. Only after disciples admit and confess their own sin, then they can confront the speck in the eye of their brother or sister (v. 5).

Jesus’s teaching in these verses runs in the opposite direction than the contemporary account of toleration, if toleration means to suspend judgment because truth is neutral. In no way does Jesus teach that truth is neutral or that disciples are to suspend judgment. In fact, Jesus teaches his disciples to judge rightly because truth is not neutral. The Lord founded the world by His wisdom. There is a moral order built into the fabric of creation. Jesus’s disciples don’t deny this universal standard. Instead, they uphold it by evaluating and amending their lives to it, by God’s grace. May Christians follow the greater righteousness by loving the standard, Jesus Himself.

Judson Marvel

Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church (PCA), Sierra Vista, AZ