

Listen, but Do Not Follow

Jesus told his disciples one of the oddest things I have ever read.

“Therefore pay attention to what they tell you and do it. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they teach.”

—Matthew 23:3 (The NET Bible)

That’s how I feel when I hear some of the voices of our day.

One of the banner cries of our current society is, “Do not judge.” That happens to be a teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Unfortunately, the meaning of this simple teaching is often misunderstood. Let me illustrate:

I was a public school teacher for a number of years. Can you believe that one of my students had the audacity to call me ‘teacher’? I shot back, “You can’t judge me!”

OK. That was sarcastic. Why would a teacher object to being called a teacher?

My point is that my student actually ‘judged’ me. At its heart, *to judge is to distinguish between things*. My student judged me correctly by calling me a teacher. She distinguished me from a carpenter, a banker or other career choices. She *identified* me as a teacher.

One aspect of judging is that of identification.

Another aspect of judging is that of *evaluation*. As an example, another student parroted his dad, “*Those who can do; those who can’t teach.*” His quip was an assessment of those who enter into the teaching profession as being lesser than those who produce things. He had devalued teachers for not producing tangible, quantifiable things.

When Jesus warned, “*Judge not so that you be not judged,*” he was targeting the kind of judgment that *evaluates* others. How do I know?

Answer: *By reading the whole text.*

Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For by the standard you judge you will be judged and the measure you use will be the measure you receive. — Matthew 7:1-2 (The NET Bible)

Jesus’ instruction was about *using standards to evaluate*, not *identification*. What do we learn?

First, there is nothing wrong with identifying people according to obvious categories of distinction: Tall, Hispanic, rich, teacher, homosexual, murderer. It is perfectly fine to identify a teacher as a teacher; likewise, a juggler, gambler, athlete, or adulterer. In fact, it is not wrong to say that murder is morally wrong according to the Bible, because that is a biblical teaching. That does not assign less value to a murderer as a person, but it does identify the murderer as immoral (according to the Bible).

Second, it IS wrong (according to Jesus) to evaluate people using an arbitrary personal standard. We should not look down on others for their choices, even immoral choices.

What is all this about???

There are many voices of our day crying out, “Do not judge me,” claiming that they are echoing the teaching of Jesus, yet they misuse His words. They identify themselves with Christianity while making obvious choices that conflict with the Bible. Then they defame anyone who points out their inconsistency by accusing them of being judgmental. Jesus called that hypocrisy.

So, when people speak the truth I will listen, but when they conflict with truth, I will not follow. How can I discern truth?

My Bible is completely open...is yours?

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