

# ***“Another Impossible Decree”***

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***In the act of complaining that others are judging you, you're judging them.***

***Matthew 7:1-6***

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## ***Pigs and margaritas***

I begin today with a comment that my Thursday morning Bible study group explicitly warned me not to include in my sermon. They said it would distract you from the main points. I think it's too good to pass up, so I'm ignoring those good men.

Here it is. When Jesus says, “Do not throw your pearls to swine,” the Greek word for pearls is “margaritas.” Really. “Do not throw your margaritas to pigs.”

Here's the connection. There are different theories about how the alcoholic beverage margarita got its name, but most of them imply it was named after someone named Margaret, which in turn derives from the word “pearl.” The most well-known tequila cocktail in the world ironically made its way from Mexico to the United States during the prohibition era. Americans couldn't drink legally within our own borders, so they would head south of the border where they learned new ways to drink.

If you think it's risky or even bold to begin a sermon on judging by calling your attention to margaritas, I'll warn you in advance I'm going even further. At the end of the sermon, I'm going to apply the principles of judging to alcohol in general. When do you have the responsibility to judge what other people drink?

## ***What Jesus said***

Most English Bibles begin chapter 7, “Do not judge,” one of the most important, most consistent, and most abused phrases in the Bible. We need the Holy Spirit's help.

The first challenge with the meaning of Jesus' command, "Do not judge," is the range of meanings of the word "judge" in both English and Greek. Consider other examples: To "bolt" can either mean to fasten together or to run away. "Cleave" can either be to join or to split. "Finished" can mean completed or destroyed.<sup>1</sup>

The word "judge" is like that. Even in the Bible, we seem to read mixed messages. The same Jesus who says "Do not judge" in Matthew 7:2 says "Judge correctly" in John 7:24. In Romans 14:13, Paul says, "Stop passing judgment on one another," and in 1 Corinthians 5:12 the same apostle tells that church are to "judge those inside" (the church). The Bible from cover to cover presumes not only that God judges, but that human judges are appointed by God. So judging is not necessarily bad.

The root idea behind "judge" is to separate, to make a distinction. Positively, judge can mean to discern, govern, or even acquit. Negatively, it can mean condemn, criticize, or reject. Since Jesus says here, "Do *not* judge," obviously he is using one of the negative senses. But which one? We'll come back to that.

Somewhat more subtle in understanding Jesus' meaning is the use of the present tense verb in Greek, which implies continuous action. Whatever Jesus means by judging, he doesn't want it to be your pattern, your habit, your way of life. "Do not keep judging."

We gain further insight into what Jesus means in the rest of that sentence and the following verse. "Do not keep judging in order that you should not be judged." Jesus taps into a self-serving motive.

So you won't miss it, Jesus repeats that point two ways in verse 2: "For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you." The way he says this leads me to conclude that Jesus is talking not about God judging you if you keep judging, but about others in your community. Does God, the Ultimate Judge, keep score every time you judge others and the extent, and at the final judgment, dole that same "measure" to you? I think not. I hope not!

Verses 3-5 present a well-known and very graphic, even humorous illustration. You're looking closely to pluck out a tiny splinter of wood that flew into your brother's eye. Good for you! How kind! But suppose you're doing that while a 2x4 is protruding out of your own. That's ridiculous the point of being absurd, which is the point.

Jesus says, "You hypocrite!" Remove your 2x4 and then you'll be able to see clearly to pluck the splinter from your brother's eye. Notice Jesus is not saying we cannot address a wrong behavior in someone else. What's hypocritical (two-faced) is doing so when you're ignoring your own sin.

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<sup>1</sup> These are "cononyms" – words whose antonym is the same spelling and pronunciation.

Jesus adds in verse 6, “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs.” Why? Because “If you do, they (the pigs) may trample them under their feet, and (the dogs may) turn and tear you to pieces.” This verse seems odd at this point, doesn’t it? Not only do the terms “dogs” and “pigs” seem offensive & insulting (some would even suggest racist), this verse simply seems out of place.

It’s important to give Jesus – and Matthew – the benefit of the doubt, which is surely one implication of the phrase, “Do not keep judging.” Jesus isn’t stupid. He knows what he just said. Some suggest Jesus didn’t put this saying here; Matthew grouped his sayings together. Even if that were true, Matthew’s not dumb either.

I see this juxtaposition as intentional, so I want to discern the reason why Jesus moves quickly from “Do not keep judging” to “Don’t throw pearls to pigs.” The language, though strong, is figurative. Don’t think of your Bruno or Daisy, fetching sticks in the backyard or snuggling up to you on the couch or in your bed. Don’t think of pot belly pig pets or even farm animals like Wilbur in Charlotte’s Web. In first century Palestine, both dogs and pigs were unclean animals. Jews didn’t adopt puppies, eat pigs, breed either one of them, or even touch them if they could avoid it. Jesus is simply making the point not to give sacred or precious things to those on whom they will be wasted or by whom they will be misused.

Verse 6 is actually perfect, in context. The command, “Do not keep judging,” is easily misunderstood. The act of confronting someone (removing the speck from their eye), is a holy act. It belongs in a sacred relationship of trust. We are talking about holy things, easily misunderstood and abused principles for how Jesus’ followers. Don’t throw them out there for just anyone in any context. Exercise care and caution.

Let me summarize what I think Jesus is saying in Matthew 7:1-6. Not everyone agrees with my interpretations here, and that’s OK – even if the disagree-er is you. I think this whole section has to do with relationships in the community of Jesus’ followers. You are connected enough to see and address the flaws of others. When you do, keep the moral searchlight focused on yourself. *Examine yourself* three ways:

- **Pattern.** If you are *constantly* condemning or finding fault, others will give it right back to you.
- **Hypocrisy.** Let the sins of others remind you of the sins that are hardest to see – your own. Only then can you lovingly confront.
- **Motive.** If you’re targeting people outside the community, people with whom you have no relationship, you may be doing so for the wrong reason. It is too easy to do more harm than good – to them and to you.

### ***Impossible***

Having given you my best interpretation of what Jesus is teaching, I now want to offer some perspective. Then we’re going to come back to margaritas.

*This is impossible.* As I said a couple of weeks ago in my sermon on Matthew 5, the whole Sermon on the Mount is filled with these kinds of unreachable standards. Never lust. Love your enemies. Don't pray with ulterior motives. Don't worry about tomorrow. In case you missed the point about impossibility, he includes, "Be perfect, as God is perfect."

Now Jesus adds, "Don't keep judging." Dick Meyer writes in *Why We Hate Us*, "We're either judgmental or brain-dead. It's an essential part of being human." We're actually hard-wired to make quick decisions about people and situations. Generally our judgmentalism doesn't come from the prefrontal cortex where we reason through our decisions. It comes from the involuntary, limbic area of the brain where the fight-or-flight reflex to a person or situation is genetic or thoroughly conditioned. We look at a behavior or even a face and we can't help but condemn or flee or criticize, at least in our head. Reprogramming those impulses takes years, sometimes generations.

One of the areas in which we constantly judge (yes, in the sense of condemn and criticize) is judging those who are judgmental! Right? Especially if they're judgmental toward *you*. Probably during this sermon you've been thinking of family members or other churches or institutions or politicians that you think of as judgmental. "I sure wish they'd have been here to hear this sermon."

Don't miss the irony: in the very act of complaining that someone is judging you, you're judging them. They don't know all the factors that have led to your behavior, even if it's egregiously wrong. But you don't know what's happened in their lives – today or all through their lives or even in their parents and grandparents – to make them so condescending toward you.

Read Romans 1 and 2 again to watch how the Apostle Paul so cleverly makes this same point. Chapter 1 is about the "sins of them" – with the constant use of the third person plural. He wants you thinking about those pagans you think deserve God's wrath – those adulterers, those teenagers, those fundamentalists, those gays, those liberals. Then he starts chapter 2, "You who judge them – you are doing the same thing!" *You* judging others as unworthy because of what they do is just as wrong in God's eyes as whatever *they* do.

This is where the bad news of the Christian gospel is so much more helpful than the faux good news of the world. There's a wide gulf between "Don't judge, because everyone's good" and "Don't judge because everyone's bad." The former is the way of the world: "Don't condemn me for what I do about money or sex or time because we're all equally good. I'm just living out who I am." The latter is the message of Jesus and Paul: "Don't keep condemning others because every single one of us – including you – is totally and irreversibly broken and blinded and so far from God's perfect standard."

Why does Jesus give not one but a whole sermon of impossible decrees? It's for your humility and for your holiness. Jesus wants you to see that you are the unworthy

one he chooses to love and comes to seek and save. He also wants to kindle in you a desire to go deeper and further – never to think you’ve already made it. Nobody who reads the Sermon on the Mount thinks, “I’ve made it.” That’s the point. So keep striving.

### ***How and when to confront***

The word “margaritas” (pearls) in this passage prompted me to attempt to apply Jesus’ teaching in the area of alcohol consumption. I could have chosen many others – sex, social media, justice and poverty, environmentalism, anger management, wealth and greed. Let’s just focus on this one.

The extremes in attitudes toward alcohol are easy to find in history and today. Prohibition was a well-intentioned but disastrous experiment in the worst of judgmentalism – declaring evil everything and everyone associated with production or consumption of alcohol. My family history – and this church’s history – is deeply connected to prohibition, so I think I understand it.

Full disclosure for those who don’t know: I don’t drink. I think alcoholic beverages smell bad and taste bad. I have no desire or use for them, and have never considered it worth the effort to develop a taste for something that costs a lot of money and could potentially lead to self-destructive behavior in someone like me who seems to easily develop bad habits. However, I don’t believe the Bible prohibits moderate and appropriate use of alcohol.

The question for today is this: When is picking up that margarita an enjoyment of God’s good gift, and when is it abuse? Even more relevant to today’s text, when and how do you decide if you need to confront someone about their inappropriate use of alcohol, whether it’s physical addiction, binge drinking, loss of inhibition when they drink too much, or the impact of their drinking on relationships at work or at home?

Let’s apply Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 7:1-6 to this topic. Before you confront someone about alcohol abuse...

***Examine your pattern.*** Don’t *keep judging*. Don’t assume the worst about people who have a drink in their hand or a carton in their grocery cart. I speak as one who was raised with that prohibition-era condescension. It’s taken a while for me to learn not to assume the worst. If you have a habit of saying too much too often, not only will people tune you out but the judgmentalism is certain to boomerang.

***Examine your hypocrisy.*** Before you can confront someone else’s drinking habits, check your own. Even if you believe you use alcohol responsibly, do a self-inventory. Ask those closest to you if they think you’re open to the charge of hypocrisy. When and why do you have to have a drink? Is the person you’re going to confront going to say, “Then why did you pull out the booze when you invited me to that party?”

Or, “What about *your* binge eating or out-of-control spending?” We have to open ourselves to the scrutiny of the Holy Spirit and to other believers and ask, “Lord, where do you want to change me so that I can be an instrument you use to change others?”

***Examine your motive.*** Why am I confronting *this* person at *this* time? Confrontation about any issue will almost never be effective if it’s spontaneous. You don’t nail the binge drinker with a drink in his hand or her wrenching head over a toilet. Don’t cast your pearls before swine. If you’re doing it for the right reason, you can wait, discern, pray, trust, and confront at the right moment with grace-blanketed truth.

Ask the right questions when confronting someone about alcohol abuse or anything else.

- How serious is the problem?
- How close is my relationship?
- Is this the right moment?

To confront is not to condemn. It may be the kindest thing you ever did for someone to approach them in humility and prayer after self-examination in the hope that God will use your words and your life to bring repentance and healing. It’s not the most loving, Christ-like thing to say nothing while your sister or brother in Christ self-destructs.

Don’t condemn and don’t destroy, but do discern and do confront.

No family or community will ever do this perfectly, because we’re all broken and blinded. But no community can afford not to keep trying. God will use even our failed efforts to complete his work of making us more and more like Christ. Amen.