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Misreadings of 'judge not' in contemporary discourse

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In contemporary discourse, Matthew 7:1 ('Judge not, that you be not judged') is frequently misused to justify absolute tolerance and moral relativism, thereby undermining the biblical call for moral discernment. This article contends that Matthew 7:1–6 does not prohibit judgement altogether but rather warns against hypocritical and self-righteous judgement, while affirming the necessity of righteous and humble discernment. The argument unfolds in three main components: (1) a close exegetical analysis of the Greek text, paying attention to its literary and rhetorical features; (2) a theological reflection rooted in Reformed tradition and informed by canonical and intertextual insights; and (3) a practical-pastoral engagement with contemporary cultural and ecclesial misappropriations of the text. By tracing intertextual connections with Old Testament wisdom literature (e.g. Pr 1:7; 9:8; 26:4–5), the article demonstrates that Jesus's call for discernment is deeply rooted in the biblical tradition that affirms moral evaluation tempered by humility and wisdom. Ultimately, the article argues that Matthew 7:1–6 envisions a redemptive form of judgement – grounded in personal repentance and theological wisdom – that enables the church to engage the world with compassionate, courageous, and gospel-shaped ethical witness.

Contribution: This article contributes to Reformed scholarship by reframing Matthew 7:1–6 as a theological model of restorative discernment. It advances the discussion by integrating rigorous exegesis, canonical and intertextual analysis, and theological synthesis, while addressing contemporary misappropriations of the text. In doing so, it equips the church to embody a cross-shaped ethic of truth and mercy in both its communal and public witness.

Keywords: Matthew 7:1–6; judgement; hypocrisy; wisdom literature; Reformed theology; restorative discernment; Sermon on the Mount; ecclesial ethics.

Introduction

Few biblical texts have been more distorted than Jesus's command in Matthew 7:1: 'Judge not, that you be not judged'. In contemporary culture this verse is often employed as a slogan for moral relativism and uncritical tolerance, serving to silence ethical critique and to discourage accountability within the church.

Such an interpretation, however, misrepresents the passage. Matthew 7:1–6 does not forbid moral evaluation; rather, it condemns hypocritical, self-righteous judgement that overlooks one's own failings. The parable of the speck and the log (Mt 7:3–5) illustrates the danger of self-deception, while verse 6 affirms the continuing necessity of prudent discernment.

The distinctive contribution of this article is to reframe Matthew 7:1–6 as a paradigm of *restorative discernment*. Whereas existing scholarship often contrasts the passage with relativism or legalism, this study demonstrates how close exegesis of the Greek text, intertextual resonance with wisdom literature, and Reformed theological synthesis together yield a constructive model of judgement that is both textually grounded and pastorally relevant.

This study argues that Matthew 7:1–6 envisions not the absence of judgement but *restorative discernment* – a kingdom ethic rooted in humility, wisdom, and covenantal fidelity. Properly understood, Jesus's teaching calls disciples to exercise judgement as those already judged by God's grace, so that correction becomes a means of restoration rather than condemnation.

To develop this argument, the study proceeds in three stages: (1) a close exegetical analysis of the Greek text; (2) a canonical and theological synthesis shaped by Reformed theology and Israel's

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wisdom tradition; and (3) an engagement with contemporary misuses of the passage in culture and church. The aim is to recover a biblically faithful ethic of judgement that resists both relativism and legalism while equipping the church for redemptive witness.

In doing so, this article contributes to current scholarship by showing that Matthew 7:1–6 is not merely a warning against hypocrisy but a positive theological framework for restorative discernment. It advances the discussion by showing how exegesis, canon, and Reformed theology converge to equip the church with a cross-shaped ethic of judgement for today's cultural context.

Although Matthew 7:1–6 is often misused to support relativism or legalism, this article argues that the passage calls instead for restorative discernment rooted in humility, wisdom, and covenant fidelity.

Research method and design

This study employed a Reformed exegetical-theological method that integrates textual, canonical, intertextual, and theological analysis. The foundation of the approach is a close reading of the Greek text of Matthew 7:1–6, with attention to lexical semantics, grammar, and rhetorical structure. The passage is then examined canonically, considering its place within the Sermon on the Mount and its intertextual resonances with Israel's wisdom tradition, particularly the book of Proverbs.

The method also incorporates theological reflection within the Reformed tradition, emphasising doctrines of sin, sanctification, and ecclesial accountability as they emerge from the exegesis. Dialogue with other interpretive traditions (liberationist, feminist, and Anabaptist) is included not as competing frameworks but as critical conversation partners that expose blind spots and sharpen the distinct contribution of a Reformed reading.

By combining rigorous exegesis with canonical and theological synthesis, the method demonstrates that Matthew 7:1–6 calls for restorative judgement – a form of discernment that is textually grounded, theologically coherent, and pastorally relevant. The study employs a Reformed exegetical-theological approach that integrates textual, canonical, intertextual, and theological analysis while engaging dialogue with alternative traditions. Drawing on Hays's (2016) intertextual analysis of the Gospels and Vanhoozer's (2005) canonical-linguistic proposal, this article approaches the text with attention both to intertextual echoes and doctrinal performance.

Exegetical and syntactical analysis of the Greek text

The foundation of this study is a close examination of the Greek text of Matthew 7:1–6, with particular attention to key lexical terms and grammatical structures:

- κρίνω (*krinō*) [I judge] appears in both active and passive forms in this passage (vv. 1–2). In Matthew, it generally implies an evaluative or condemnatory act depending on context. The verb *κρίνω* is used in judicial and moral contexts (BDAG, s.v. 'κρίνω'; LSJ, s.v. 'κρίνω'; Edwards et al. 2014–2016, 2:248–253). While krinō can denote legal or judicial decisions (Mt 5:40), here it connotes *presumptuous or unjust moral appraisal.*
- ὑποκριτής (*hypokritēs*) [hypocrite] (Mt 7:5) is a Matthean hallmark (cf. 6:2, 5, 16; 23:13–29), functioning as a *moral diagnostic* for those who perform religious or ethical acts for show while lacking inner righteousness. The noun ὑποκριτής has theatrical origins, later extended to religious hypocrisy (BDAG, s.v. 'ὑποκριτής'; cf. LSJ, s.v. 'ὑποκριτής').
- ἅγιος (*hagios*) [holy] (Mt 7:6) connects this passage to broader biblical notions of *sacred space, consecration, and moral discernment*, implying that not all recipients of truth are to be approached uncritically. The term 'ἅγιος' denotes what is set apart for God, carrying implications of both cultic and moral purity (Arendt et al. 2000; s.v. *'ἅγιος'*; Edwards et al. 2014–2016, 1:111–17).

Syntactically, the passage follows a balanced literary flow: a negative command (Mt 7:1–2), a parabolic illustration (vv. 3–5), and a proverbial warning (v. 6), forming a coherent progression from error to correction to wise application. A close reading of the Greek text highlights the dangers of presumption [μὴ κρίνετε], the exposure of hypocrisy [ὑποκριτά], and the prudence required in handling what is sacred [τὸ ἅγιον].

Canonical and redemptive-historical contextualisation

Matthew 7:1–6 is interpreted within the *larger context of the Sermon on the Mount* (vv. 5–7), where Jesus presents an ethical vision of the kingdom marked by mercy, inner transformation, and countercultural righteousness (cf. 5:20; 6:1). As France (2007; Mt 5–7) notes, the Sermon on the Mount intensifies the ethical demands of the law. This broader context prevents the passage from being isolated from Jesus's consistent call to *radical holiness and communal accountability* (Mt 18:15–20). Within this framework, Matthew 7:1–6 is situated within the Sermon on the Mount and resonates with Proverbs 1:7, 9:8, and 26:4–5, underscoring its continuity with Israel's wisdom tradition. Von Rad (1972) highlights how Israel's wisdom tradition frames moral discernment as a divine gift.

Engagement with contemporary cultural appropriations

Finally, the study critically evaluates how Matthew 7:1 is employed in popular discourse to suppress theological or ethical dissent. It reflects on the risks of *secular tolerance ideology* on the one hand, and *evangelical legalism* on the other, proposing a middle path that embodies the *Christ-centred ethic of both grace and truth* (Jn 1:14). Practical implications are considered for preaching, counselling, and public apologetics. As Taylor (2007) observes, relativism and tolerance are defining features of the secular age.

To develop this argument, the article unfolds in four major movements. It begins with a close exegetical analysis of Matthew 7:1–6, followed by a canonical and intertextual exploration of its place within the Sermon on the Mount and Israel's wisdom tradition. On this foundation, the article offers a theological-ethical synthesis, sharpened through dialogue with liberationist, feminist, and Anabaptist perspectives, before addressing contemporary cultural distortions of 'judge not' and their pastoral implications. The article concludes by showing how a cross-shaped ethic of restorative discernment enables the church to resist both relativism and legalism while embodying truth and grace in community life.

Literary and contextual framing of Matthew 7:1–6 within the Sermon on the Mount

Situating the passage within the structure of Matthew 5–7

Matthew 7:1–6 is not an isolated moral saying but is deeply embedded within the broader ethical framework of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7), which functions as Jesus's authoritative vision of kingdom righteousness. The sermon unfolds as a covenantal manifesto, echoing the giving of the law at Sinai and rearticulating Torah considering Jesus's messianic authority (cf. Mt 5:17–20). As Davies and Allison (2004:454) note, the Sermon exhibits a coherent ethical and theological progression that redefines righteousness as inward transformation rather than external compliance.

Within this structure, Matthew 7:1–6 forms part of the final movement (7:1–12) that addresses relationships and discernment within the kingdom community. It builds on earlier exhortations regarding hypocritical religiosity (Mt 6:1–18) and anxious self-dependence (6:19–34), turning now attention to interpersonal correction and communal accountability. The transition from private piety to social ethics is intentional: those transformed by the Father's grace must now embody that same grace in their dealings with others.

Pennington (2017:149–50) describes this section as part of the Sermon's 'relational triangle' – our relationship with God, with others, and with ourselves. He (Pennington 2017:149–50) also emphasises that the Sermon on the Mount presents a vision of human flourishing.

In this light, Matthew 7:1–6 is not a prohibition of judgement in abstract but a summons to relational discernment shaped by kingdom values of mercy, integrity, and mutual accountability.

Chiastic and progressive structure

Recent literary analyses suggest that Matthew 7:1–6 may exhibit either a chiastic or a progressive rhetorical structure. A chiastic pattern highlights the balance and inversion characteristic of Hebrew poetics, while a progressive structure underscores a development of thought from general prohibition to specific application. Both approaches are heuristically useful. According to Kennedy (1984:32–34), rhetorical criticism helps to clarify how early Christian texts were crafted for persuasion.

Chiastic proposal: Some researchers have suggested the following chiastic arrangement (cf. Blomberg 1992:127; Talbert 2004:86):

A (Mt 7:1–2) – Warning against judgement and its reciprocity
  B (7:3–4) – Illustration of hypocrisy: the speck and the log
    C (7:5a) – *Identification: 'You hypocrite'*
  B′ (7:5b) – Remove the log, then help your brother
A′ (7:6) – Warning against misplaced discernment

In this arrangement, the central rebuke ('you hypocrite') serves as the ethical hinge of the passage. It shows that the problem is not judgement itself, but judgement exercised without moral self-awareness and humility. The outer brackets (A/A′) both address discernment, although from opposite angles: the first warns against harsh self-righteousness; the second against naïve indiscrimination.

Progressive development: Alternatively, the structure may be read as a progression of moral responsibility:

- Matthew 7:1–2: A general principle – judgement invites reciprocal judgement
- verses 3–5: A specific problem – hypocrisy in correction
- verse 6: A concluding qualification – discernment remains necessary.

This progression aligns with classical rhetorical teaching that moves from principle to illustration to qualification (cf. Kennedy 1984:32–34) and is echoed by Blomberg (1992:127). Jesus first unsettles the audience's instinct to judge, then exposes the inner contradiction of hypocritical morality, and finally reaffirms the necessity of wise evaluation.

Luz (2007:359), however, warns against simplistic linear readings of the Sermon, preferring to describe its structure as 'mosaic and meditative', interweaving themes that return with shifting emphases. Even so, the thematic coherence of Matthew 7:1–6 is preserved by the framing logic of discernment that is humble (vv. 1–5) yet not foolish (v. 6).

Ethical themes: Righteousness, mercy, and integrity

At its core, Matthew 7:1–6 advances a kingdom ethic shaped by three dominant interwoven themes: righteousness, mercy, and integrity.

Righteousness [δικαιοσύνη]: Righteousness is central to the Sermon's ethical vision (Mt 5:6, 10, 20), not merely as forensic justification but as right conduct rooted in covenant fidelity. Matthew 7:1–6 exposes a false righteousness that seeks to elevate the self by condemning others – a practice Jesus condemns as hypocrisy (ὑποκριτής). Instead, the call is to pursue righteousness that begins with honest self-examination and leads to redemptive correction.

Calvin (1949:1.349) observed that 'those who are more severe judges of others are commonly the most partial and indulgent to themselves', reflecting the Reformed concern with human

depravity. Yet his focus on hypocrisy as moral inconsistency may be expanded by recognising, with Luz (2007:361), that Matthew deploys ὑποκριτής polemically to unmask religious pretence as both a theological and ethical failure.

Mercy [ἔλεος]: Closely bound to righteousness is mercy, which Jesus elevates as a kingdom virtue (cf. Mt 5:7; 9:13; 12:7). The prohibition of harsh judgement does not suspend ethics but is a demand that moral engagement be tempered with mercy. To judge without mercy is to deny the mercy one has received (cf. Mt 18:21–35).

Allison (2004:125) highlights this point: 'The danger of judging others lies not only in hypocrisy but also in the absence of mercy – the failure to see others as fellow recipients of divine grace'.

Integrity [ἁπλότης] (sincerity of purpose): Integrity lies at the heart of the Sermon's call to wholeness. From almsgiving to prayer, fasting to speech, Jesus warns against divided motives. One who judges others while ignoring personal sin displays fractured integrity – an external morality detached from inner renewal. Matthew 7:1–6 therefore calls for ethical wholeness: honest self-appraisal, humble engagement, and wisdom rooted in grace.

Vanhoozer (2014:203), reflecting on Christian communication, observes: 'To speak truth without love is not only un-Christlike but miscommunicates the gospel. The medium must match the message'. This principle governs the ethos of judgement envisioned in this text where doctrine is meant to be performed within the life of the church.

Exegetical analysis of Matthew 7:1–6: Hypocrisy, judgement, and discernment

This section offers a close reading of the Greek text of Matthew 7:1–6, attending to syntax, lexical nuance, and theological implications. While a modern discourse tends to reduce this passage to a maxim against moral evaluation, the pericope itself calls for a more nuanced ethic – one that distinguishes between self-righteous condemnation and redemptive discernment.

Personal translation

Jesus critiques judgement that is hypocritical, disproportionate, and lacking in self awareness, but not the practice of wise moral evaluation itself as is clear in the verses:

- Do not judge, so that you yourselves may not be judged (Mt 7:1).
- For with the judgement you pronounce, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you (Mt 7:2).
- Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye but fail to notice the beam in your own eye? (Mt 7:3).
- Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take out the speck from your eye' when the beam is in your own eye? (Mt 7:4).
- Hypocrite! First remove the beam from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye (Mt 7:5).
- Do not give what is holy to dogs, nor cast your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot, and turn and tear you to pieces (Mt 7:6).

Lexical and grammatical observations

κρίνω [to judge]: The verb κρίνω has a broad semantic range, from legal adjudication to evaluative discernment to condemnatory judgement. In Matthew, it often carries a moral or eschatological evaluation (cf. Mt 5:40; 19:28; 25:31–46). In Matthew 7:1, the present imperative with μή (μὴ κρίνετε) conveys an ongoing prohibition, best rendered as 'stop judging' or 'do not make it your practice to judge' (Wallace 1996:720). The corresponding passive in Matthew 7:1 (ἵνα μὴ κριθῆτε) functions as a 'divine passive', implying that God is the ultimate judge (Davies & Allison 2004:677). Thus, the warning is not a call to suspend all discernment but cautions against presumptuously usurping God's prerogative. Matthew 7:2 strengthens this point: the reciprocal measure (ἐν ᾧ μέτρῳ) frames judgement within divine reciprocity. Those who assume the divine role of condemner will themselves be judged accordingly. The emphasis therefore falls on the danger of self-exalting evaluation that forgets human accountability before God.

ὑποκριτής [hypocrite]: The charge 'ὑποκριτά' in Matthew 7:5 stands at the rhetorical centre of the pericope, functioning as its ethical hinge. Originally derived from Greek theatre, where it referred to an actor behind a mask, the term in Matthew consistently denotes spiritual pretence and duplicity (cf. Mt 6:2, 5, 16; 23:13–29). Far from being a generic insult, ὑποκριτής is a polemical label that unmasks those who perform external piety without inner integrity. In Matthew 7:3–5, its force is sharpened by the absurd image of the κάρφος [speck] and δοκός [beam]: the hypocrite, blinded by self-deception, presumes to correct others while ignoring his own far greater failing. Within Matthew's broader narrative, the epithet 'hypocrite' functions not merely as moral critique but as a theological diagnosis, exposing the root problem of self-righteousness as antithetical to the kingdom ethic. Thus, the rebuke underscores that correction is legitimate only after the self has been confronted by God's judgement and grace.

ἅγιον [holy]: The adjective ἅγιον in Matthew 7:6 introduces the proverbial warning against casting sacred things before dogs or pearls before pigs. In the Matthean usage, ἅγιος typically denotes what belongs to God's sphere of consecration – his name (Mt 6:9), his temple (24:15), his angels (25:31). Here the term appears absolutely (τὸ ἅγιον), most likely referring to the sacred realities of the gospel or divine wisdom (cf. Pr 9:7–8; 23:9). Positioned at the close of the pericope shifts the emphasis: while the disciples are forbidden to judge hypocritically (Mt 7:1–5), they are still commanded to exercise discernment about the appropriate

handling of the holy truth. This dual movement – away from condemnation but toward prudence – reinforces the balance of the passage. Christian discernment must therefore avoid condemnation without lapsing into indiscrimination: the sanctity of God's truth demands careful stewardship even as its proclamation remains gracious and missional.

Matthew 7:1–2: The principle of reciprocal judgement

'Μὴ κρίνετε, ἵνα μὴ κριθῆτε· ἐν ᾧ γὰρ κρίματι κρίνετε, κριθήσεσθε, καὶ ἐν ᾧ μέτρῳ μετρεῖτε, μετρηθήσεται ὑμῖν'.

The prohibition 'Μὴ κρίνετε' [Do not judge] uses the present imperative with μή, which typically signals an ongoing command: 'stop judging' or 'do not make it your practice to judge' (Wallace 1996:720). The verb κρίνω carries a semantic range that includes legal adjudication, moral evaluation, and condemnation. In the Matthean context, it tends toward the latter, denoting a presumptuous and self-exalting posture that contrasts sharply with kingdom humility (cf. Mt 5:3).

Matthew 7:2 provides the rationale: judgement invites reciprocal judgement. The double reference to κρίματι [judgement] and μέτρῳ [measure] echoes the *lex talionis* principle – judgement in proportion to one's own standard (cf. Mt 6:14–15). This 'measure for measure' principle is not merely psychological (how others will respond) but eschatological, pointing toward divine judgement (Davies & Allison 2004:677; cf. Rm 2:1–3). As Blomberg (1992:127) notes, Jesus warns that those who assume the role of divine judge will find God assuming the same stance toward them. While this reading highlights the eschatological reciprocity in Matthew 7:2, it underplays the rhetorical force of the prohibition in verse 1, which functions not only as a warning but as a reorientation of communal ethics.

Importantly, this reciprocal principle does not rule out all discernment. As Calvin (1949:349) observes, 'He does not forbid us to reprove sin, but he forbids us to do so with a prideful, censorious spirit that forgets our own guilt'.

Matthew 7:3–5: The parable of the speck and the log: Hypocrisy exposed

Τί δὲ βλέπεις τὸ κάρφος τὸ ἐν τῷ ὀφθαλμῷ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ σου, τὴν δὲ δοκὸν ἐν τῷ σῷ ὀφθαλμῷ οὐ κατανοεῖς; ἢ πῶς ἐρεῖς τῷ ἀδελφῷ σου· Ἄφες ἐκβάλω τὸ κάρφος ἐκ τοῦ ὀφθαλμοῦ σου, καὶ ἰδοὺ ἡ δοκὸς ἐν τῷ ὀφθαλμῷ σοῦ; ὑποκριτά, ἔκβαλε πρῶτον τὴν δοκὸν ἐκ τοῦ ὀφθαλμοῦ σοῦ, καὶ τότε διαβλέψεις ἐκβαλεῖν τὸ κάρφος ἐκ τοῦ ὀφθαλμοῦ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ σου.

Jesus uses a striking and humorous hyperbole: a κάρφος versus a δοκός. The contrast is deliberately absurd – a tiny irritant in one eye compared with a large timber in another – dramatising the moral blindness of those who seek to correct others while ignoring their own sin. Calvin (1949:349) observes that those most severe in judging others are often indulgent toward themselves, underscoring the charge of hypocrisy.

The key word, ὑποκριτά, signals not merely inconsistency but also moral performance – a theme frequent in Matthew (cf. 6:2, 5, 16; 23:13–28). The term as already alluded to, likely derives from Greek theatre, where an actor played a role behind a mask. In the Gospel's usage, it denotes a spiritual pretence that substitutes outward piety for inner transformation (Luz 2007:361).

The participle διαβλέψεις [then you will see clearly] is crucial. Jesus does not say 'do not remove the speck', but insists that one must first deal with the log in their own eye. This affirms the necessity of moral discernment – post-repentance, not pretence.

As Allison (2004:127) emphasises, correction is not disallowed but conditioned by the transformation of the one who corrects. Thus, the rebuke is not against judgement as such but against hypocrisy that undermines the credibility and integrity of the moral witness.

Matthew 7:6: The call to prudence: Holy things, dogs, and swine

Μὴ δῶτε τὸ ἅγιον τοῖς κυσίν, μηδὲ βάλητε τοὺς μαργαρίτας ὑμῶν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν χοίρων, μήποτε καταπατήσωσιν αὐτοὺς ἐν τοῖς ποσὶν αὐτῶν, καὶ στραφέντες ῥήξωσιν ὑμᾶς.

Although sometimes treated as a standalone proverb, this verse is best understood as the conclusion of the previous section. It balances the warning against self-righteous judgement with a call to prudent discernment. The terms τὸ ἅγιον [the holy] and τοὺς μαργαρίτας [pearls] symbolise sacred truths or gospel wisdom (cf. Mt 13:45–46). Dogs and pigs – unclean animals in Jewish tradition – represent hostile or contemptuous recipients (cf. Pr 9:7–8; 23:9).

The caution here is not against evangelism but to recognise that not all people are ready or willing to receive correction or holy things. Jesus himself demonstrated such discernment, withdrawing at times from those who hardened their hearts (Mt 13:13–15). As Pennington (2017:150) notes, 'Kingdom discernment requires knowing not only what to say, but when and to whom to say it'. He (Pennington 2017:150) underscores that the Sermon on the Mount portrays life in God's kingdom as integral to genuine human flourishing.

This verse affirms that judgement, rightly understood, is both necessary and wise. The disciple must balance compassionate engagement with sober judgement, lest what is sacred be trampled and the messenger harmed. Calvin's (1949:352) comment remains striking: 'Dogs and swine must not be fed with the Gospel; for it is a profanation of holy things, and it brings reproach upon Christ'.

From condemnation to discernment: A theological shift

The textual flow of Matthew 7:1–6 leads the reader through a theological transformation – from condemnation to discernment, from hypocrisy to humility. Jesus critiques

those who seek to correct others without being corrected themselves, but he does not negate the ethical responsibility to address wrongdoing. Rather, he simply redefines correction as an act grounded in love, clarity, and wisdom.

Within this framework, theological discernment must be:

- Self-reflective: beginning with the beam in one's own eye.
- Relationally redemptive: seeking to restore a people rather than shame them.
- Wisely bounded: safeguarding holy things from destructive rejection.

Vanhoozer (2014:221) captures this balance well: 'The Christian's task is not to sit in judgement but to bear witness – yet witness itself includes the call to repentance and truth'.

Theological reflections: Kingdom ethics and the balance of grace and truth

The Sermon on the Mount, and particularly Matthew 7:1–6, presents an ethical vision rooted in the inbreaking reign of God – a kingdom defined not by legalistic conformity or relativistic permissiveness but by a radical reordering of human relationships in light of divine mercy and righteousness. The theological coherence of this passage can be seen in three interrelated themes: kingdom judgement, redemptive ethics, and cross-shaped community.

While the Reformed tradition emphasises redemptive judgement rooted in covenantal grace and the cross, other theological frameworks offer different emphases. Liberation theologians, for example, often view Jesus's teaching here as a denunciation of oppressive systems that hypocritically judge the marginalised while protecting the powerful. Feminist theologians often highlight the dangers of patriarchal moralism embedded in judgemental readings of Scripture, calling instead for interpretive frameworks centred on empathy, mutuality, and justice. Anabaptist traditions may stress non-judgement and appeasing as essential to discipleship, interpreting Matthew 7:1–6 as a radical summons to renounce coercive moralism altogether. While these perspectives raise important ethical and contextual concerns, the Reformed tradition offers a distinct voice by affirming moral accountability while rooting it in the transforming grace of Christ, the authority of Scripture, and the sanctifying work of the Spirit within covenant community.

Liberation theologians, particularly those writing in postcolonial contexts, often read Matthew 7:1–6 as a call to resist structural and institutional hypocrisy that marginalises the poor under the guise of moral superiority. They interpret Jesus's warning against judgement as a critique of religious elites who ignore justice and solidarity. Feminist perspectives similarly emphasise that moral correction has often been wielded against women disproportionately, advocating instead for mutual accountability grounded in empathy and relational justice. Anabaptist perspectives, shaped by their historic peace witness, frame this passage as a call to reject coercive forms of correction in favour of communal discernment shaped by Christ's humility.

Judgement reframed: From condemnation to restoration

Jesus's warning in Matthew 7:1 against judgement should not be read as a categorical prohibition of moral evaluation. Rather, it reframes judgement both eschatologically and relationally. Reformed theologians, such as Calvin (1949:350) and Bavinck (2003:260), emphasise that the problem is not judgement itself but judgement from a self-righteous position that usurps divine prerogative. Matthew 7:1–2 thus serves as a theocentric reminder: we are not the final judges, and therefore all human evaluation must be carried out in humility and accountability.

Vanhoozer (2014:222) usefully distinguishes between a 'judgemental spirit' and 'spiritual judgement', insisting that the latter is essential for Christian witness. 'To judge redemptively is to hold truth and love in tension, refusing both to flatter sin and to shame sinners'.

The imagery of the speck and the log thus diagnoses human depravity, while the imperative to 'remove the log' signals sanctification, leading to a Reformed synthesis sharpened through dialogue with liberationist, feminist, and Anabaptist perspectives.

Intertextual engagement with wisdom literature

Proverbs 1:7: The fear of the Lord and discernment

Proverbs 1:7 states, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction'. This foundational verse frames the entire wisdom tradition. The *fear of the Lord* [יִרְאַת יְהוָה] denotes reverent awe, covenantal loyalty, and submission to God's authority. In Matthew 7:1–2, Jesus situates discernment within precisely this horizon: 'with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you'. The principle of reciprocal judgement echoes wisdom's insistence that moral evaluation takes place *coram Deo* [before the face of God]. Thus, disciples cannot judge autonomously, for their judgements are themselves subject to divine scrutiny. The Matthean warning against presumption mirrors the wisdom tradition's critique of fools who resist correction. Von Rad (1972) explores the theological depth of Israel's wisdom literature.

Proverbs 9:8: Rebuke and reception

Proverbs 9:8 says, 'Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you'. This verse anticipates Jesus's caution in Matthew 7:6, where sacred things must not be wasted (cf. Pr 9:8).

Both texts highlight the relational dynamics of correction: not all recipients respond constructively. Wisdom entails discernment in recognising when reproof edifies and when it profanes. The Matthean metaphor intensifies the

proverb's logic: sacred realities [τὸ ἅγιον, μαργαρίτας] must not be squandered where they will be despised. This parallel underscores that 'judge not' is not the suspension of moral engagement but conditions it with prudence and relational sensitivity. The wise embrace correction; the scoffer resents it. Jesus thus stands in continuity with Israel's wisdom tradition while heightening its urgency considering the kingdom.

Proverbs 26:4–5: Answering the fool

To deal with a fool, Proverbs 26:4-5 offers straight forward counsel, 'Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes'. These paired proverbs capture wisdom's situational character: discernment requires judgement about *when* to engage and *when* to refrain. At first glance contradictory, they illustrate that wisdom is not formulaic but context sensitive. Matthew 7:1–6 reflects the same logic: verses 1–5 forbid hypocritical correction that mimics the folly it condemns, while verse 6 demands courageous engagement when silence would allow folly to go unchallenged. Jesus's ethic therefore embodies wisdom as an art of discernment rather than a rigid rule.

Socio-cultural function of wisdom sayings

In their original context, proverbs functioned as pedagogical tools in family, court, and sapiential settings, shaping communal identity and moral formation. By employing similar imagery (specks, logs, pearls, swine), Jesus situates his instruction within this pedagogical tradition but reorients it toward the ethics of the kingdom. His disciples, like Israel's sages, are called to cultivate prudence, humility, and context-sensitive judgement – yet now under the authority of the Messiah, who embodies divine wisdom (cf. 1 Cor 1:30).

The intertextual dialogue with Proverbs clarifies that Matthew 7:1–6 is not a novel command but a continuation and fulfilment of Israel's wisdom ethic. Its message is neither relativistic silence nor pharisaic (hypocritical) rigidity but measured discernment that reflects covenantal fear of the Lord, prudent situational judgement, and respect for the sanctity of truth.

Kingdom ethics: Grace transformed moral vision

The ethic of the kingdom is not defined by external rule-keeping but by internal transformation – a righteousness surpassing that of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 5:20). This righteousness is theological at its core, flowing from God's justifying and sanctifying grace. The 'log' in one's own eye (Mt 7:3–5) symbolises the doctrine of indwelling sin, which the believer must continually confront through repentance and renewal.

As Horton (2009:96) notes, 'The moral law drives us to Christ in repentance, and Christ sends us back to the law in grateful obedience – not to judge others, but to serve them in love'. In this light, Jesus's instruction affirms the necessity of moral clarity, but only as it flows from personal grace and ethical coherence.

Cross-shaped community: Truth in love

Kingdom community is forged at the intersection of truth and love (Eph 4:15). Within the church, mutual accountability must always reflect the cross, where judgement and mercy converge. The goal of all moral discernment, including correction, is restoration (Gl 6:1), not condemnation.

The imagery of the eye is especially poignant: eyes are delicate, and removing specks requires gentleness, precision, and care. Likewise, correction within the church shaped by the cross will correct but with humility and tenderness, never with triumphalism.

This intertextual grounding in Israel's wisdom tradition provides the foundation for the theological synthesis that follows, where the dynamics of judgement, hypocrisy, and restoration are drawn into a distinctly Reformed perspective.

Wisdom and discernment: Intertextual resonances with Old Testament wisdom literature

The ethical teaching of Jesus in Matthew 7:1–6 is not a novelty detached from Israel's moral heritage. Rather, it draws deeply on Old Testament wisdom literature, particularly Proverbs, where the art of discernment is cultivated through reverence, humility, measured speech, and context-sensitive reproof. This section traces the intertextual resonance between Matthew 7:1–6 and key wisdom texts – Proverbs 1:7, 9:8, and 26:4–5 – showing how Jesus's ethic of righteous judgement both aligns with and fulfils this tradition. It argues that Jesus's teaching should be read as a form of wisdom instruction for discipleship in the new covenant community.

Redemptive judgement in a Reformed perspective

The parable of the speck and the log (Mt 7:3–5) does more than expose human hypocrisy; it theologically discloses both the depth of sin and the necessity of sanctification. The exaggerated contrast between κάραφος and δοκός dramatises self-deception: one who magnifies another's fault while ignoring a greater guilt of one's own. This is not mere moral failure but a theological diagnosis consistent with the Reformed doctrine of *total depravity*. Blinded by pride, human beings naturally minimise their own sin while maximising that of others. Jesus's rebuke, 'ὑποκριτά', unmasks this condition: hypocrisy is not only inconsistency but the refusal to confront the pervasive corruption of the heart (cf. Jr 17:9).

Yet the command to 'first remove the beam from your own eye' simultaneously gestures toward the Spirit's work of sanctification. The removal of the log is not human self-repair but a Spirit-enabled act of repentance, cleansing, and renewal. Calvin (1949:1.349) notes that 'those who are most severe judges of others are usually the most partial to themselves'; hence, the only way to see clearly (διαβλέψεις) is through grace that heals self-blindness. The participle 'then you will

see clearly' (Mt 7:5) implies that sanctification restores moral vision, enabling disciples to correct others with gentleness and wisdom – not as a performance of superiority but as an act of service

This interplay of depravity and sanctification reframes judgement within the Reformed theological horizon. On the one hand, judgement must be chastened by awareness of indwelling sin; on the other, it must be energised by confidence in the Spirit's renewing power. The ethic of discernment is therefore grounded in the gospel: sinners judged and forgiven become instruments of restoration within the covenant community. Hypocrisy corrupts judgement; sanctification redeems it.

Dialogue with other traditions

While the Reformed tradition offers a robust framework for reading Matthew 7:1–6, dialogue with other theological approaches can both enrich and sharpen interpretation. Liberationist, feminist, and Anabaptist perspectives, in particular, raise significant questions for how this text functions in communities of faith.

Liberationist readings often emphasise Jesus's warning as a critique of systemic hypocrisy. Religious elites, they argue, weaponised moral authority to maintain power while neglecting justice for the poor. In this light, 'judge not' exposes institutional oppression disguised as piety. Such a perspective highlights the *socio-political dimensions* of hypocrisy and rightly warns against structural injustices cloaked in religious language. Yet, from a Reformed standpoint, the danger lies in reducing the text solely to social critique, potentially neglecting the deeper corruption of the human heart. Matthew 7:3–5 indicts not only oppressive systems but also the universal corruption of sin that blinds individuals and communities alike.

Feminist interpretations frequently draw attention to the disproportionate ways in which judgement has been wielded against women, especially in patriarchal ecclesial settings. They argue that moral correction, applied unevenly, perpetuates gendered power imbalances. This critique draws necessary attention to how misreadings of 'judge not' have been mobilised to silence women or subject them to double standards. Reformed theology can receive this caution as a call to exercise judgement with equity and humility. Yet some feminist readings sometimes risk collapsing discernment into empathy alone, neglecting the biblical tension between mercy and truth. From a Reformed perspective, judgement must be compassionate *but also* theologically accountable to God's revealed Word.

Anabaptist traditions tend to read Matthew 7:1–6 as a call to radical non-judgement, consistent with their emphasis on peace-making and non-coercion. This perspective commendably foregrounds humility, communal accountability, and the rejection of domination. Yet, if applied in absolute terms, it risks erasing the necessary distinction between condemnatory judgement and restorative correction. While sharing the commitment to humility, the Reformed tradition affirms that church discipline (Mt 18:15–20) remains a mark of the true church. Discernment, rightly exercised, is restorative rather than coercive.

Together, these perspectives remind us that interpretation always occurs in community and in history. Liberationist, feminist, and Anabaptist voices expose blind spots in traditional readings, exposing the dangers of systemic, gendered, and authoritarian misuse of judgement. Yet the Reformed reading insists that the text's ultimate horizon is not human power but divine grace. Jesus's warning summons the church to cross-shaped judgement that is neither oppressive nor evasive – firm in truth, rich in mercy, and accountable to the God who alone is Judge.

Wisdom as the moral posture of the disciple

In Jesus's hands, the wisdom tradition is not abolished but fulfilled. The true disciple embodies wisdom not merely in abstract moral reflection but in a lived posture of humility, mercy, and discernment. The Sermon on the Mount itself concludes with a wisdom motif: 'Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock' (Mt 7:24).

Matthew 7:1–6, then, functions as a wisdom text for the new covenant community. It teaches how to live in light of God's justice (Mt 7:1–2), how to correct others with integrity (vv. 3–5), and how to engage hostile contexts with caution and reverence (v. 6). It presupposes a heart shaped by Scripture, aware of one's own sin, and formed by the gospel of grace. Theologically, the New Testament identifies Christ himself as the fulfilment of divine wisdom. As Paul declares, 'Christ Jesus … became to us wisdom from God' (1 Cor 1:30). Ethical discernment in Matthew 7:1–6 is therefore not merely a moral skill derived from human reflection, but a Spirit-enabled conformity to the mind of Christ. In Christ, wisdom is no longer abstract but incarnate – embodied in a life of humility, compassion, and holy judgement. Therefore, to live wisely is to live Christocentrically: judging with grace, speaking with restraint, and walking in the fear of the Lord.

Reformed theology has always affirmed this union of wisdom and sanctification. As Murray (1955:149) writes, 'Sanctification is the fruit of truth, and truth is the domain of wisdom. To grow in Christ is to grow in wise love and discerning holiness'.

Accordingly, Jesus's ethic in Matthew 7:1–6 is best understood not as a legal maxim but as a wisdom paradigm. It calls the church into a tradition that values measured speech, appropriate reproof, and context-sensitive engagement. It draws deeply on Israel's Scripture while advancing a distinctly Christocentric ethic – one in which judgement is shaped not by superiority but by mercy and discernment.

In an age of polarised discourse and shallow communication, this summons to wisdom is both urgent and liberating. It teaches the church to correct without condemning, to speak truth without trampling, and to live as those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways.

Engaging contemporary culture: From moral relativism to compassionate discernment

Matthew 7:1 has often been misused as a cultural slogan for relativism, invoked to silence moral critique and defend uncritical tolerance. This misreading detaches the verse from its literary and canonical context, reducing Jesus's nuanced call for discernment to a blanket rejection of evaluation.

Conversely, ecclesial contexts have often erred in the opposite direction. Matthew 7:6 has been employed to justify harsh exclusion or doctrinal gatekeeping, weaponising discernment in ways that contradict the humility demanded in verses 3–5.

Both distortions betray the passage's intent. Jesus critiques self-righteous condemnation without suspending discernment; He calls for judgement that is restorative rather than condemnatory. A contemporary example may be found in online 'rebuke culture', where correction is often harsh, public, and detached from relationship. Such practices expose the urgent need for a gospel-shaped ethic of judgement – one that is humble, relational, and redemptive.

Cultural misappropriation of 'judge not'

Matthew 7:1 has frequently been co-opted as a cultural slogan in modern discourse, particularly within postmodern and progressive ethical frameworks. It is often invoked to defend a tolerance ethic that treats all viewpoints and lifestyles as equally valid, regardless of moral or theological content. Such a reading, however, decontextualises the passage from its narrative and canonical framework.

Cahill (1994:23–25) and Gushee (2015:81–84), among others, have proposed readings of Christian ethics grounded primarily in narrative inclusion and empathy, warning against any judgement that might produce exclusion. While these concerns are pastorally motivated, they risk collapsing all judgement into judgementalism, thereby eroding the church's prophetic and moral vocation.

As noted by Carson (2012:93), 'One of the most common heresies of our age is the reduction of Christian love to unconditional affirmation'. True love must be anchored in truth; otherwise, it ceases to be love.

Legalism and hypocritical readings within the church

Conversely, many evangelical and fundamentalist communities have swung to the opposite extreme, using Matthew 7:6 to justify exclusion, rigidity, and moral policing. In such interpretations, 'discernment' becomes a euphemism for spiritual elitism or doctrinal gatekeeping. This too misrepresents the passage, which places the initial burden on the self before the other: 'first take the log out of your own eye' (Mt 7:5).

Here the Reformed understanding of human depravity and grace is essential. As Edwards (1994:130) observes, 'He that is most humble is the fittest to reprove, because he is least likely to do it with self-exaltation'.

Toward a theology of restorative judgement

In contrast to both cultural relativism and ecclesial legalism, Matthew 7:1–6 offers a vision of restorative judgement – a practice that holds moral truth and gospel humility in dynamic tension. This requires:

- Theological grounding (judgement belongs to God).
- Spiritual preparation (self-examination and repentance).
- Contextual wisdom (knowing when, to whom and how to speak).
- Pastoral sensitivity (aiming at restoration, not reputation).

To engage culture with this ethic will require both courage and compassion. It means rejecting both the silence of fear and the violence of pride. It requires confronting injustice while confessing our complicity. It calls us to judge as forgiven sinners under the cross. As Pennington (2017:152) writes, 'Flourishing comes not from the suspension of all judgement, but from judging as those who have first been judged and justified by the King'. The Sermon underscores the kingdom as the path to human flourishing.

Contemporary case studies illustrate the urgent relevance of this passage. In debates on LGBTQ+ inclusion, for instance, appeals to 'judge not' are often used to silence any theological or ethical critique, while some conservative responses have weaponised doctrine without pastoral love. Similarly, the rise of online rebuke culture, especially on social media platforms, reveals how public correction frequently lacks the humility, relationship, and gospel-restraint demanded by Matthew 7:1–6. Churches must resist both the fear of confrontation and the addiction to outrage, embodying instead a model of redemptive correction grounded in Scripture, humility, and the hope of transformation.

If cultural misappropriations distort Jesus's teaching on judgement, the church must embody an alternative practice. The following section outlines concrete strategies for restorative judgement in ecclesial life. The passage critiques both cultural relativism, which silences truth, and ecclesial legalism, which weaponises correction, calling for restorative discernment as an alternative.

Righteous judgement without legalism: Pastoral and ecclesial implications

Matthew 7:1–6 summons the church to a practice of judgement that avoids the silence of relativism on the one

hand and the harshness of legalism on the other. Righteous discernment becomes possible only when shaped by humility, grounded in Scripture, and oriented toward restoration. Drawing on biblical precedent, Reformed ecclesiology, and contemporary pastoral concerns, this section outlines how the church may embody judgement that is both faithful and redemptive.

Strategies for restorative ecclesial practice

To embody Matthew 7:1–6 faithfully, congregations must cultivate practices that are intentional rather than reactive.

Firstly, discernment must be taught as a Spirit-formed discipline. Churches are called to catechise the conscience and form Christian character so that judgement is not reduced to instinct or personal opinion but emerges from Scripture, prayer, and the community of faith. Such formation guards against both the permissiveness of relativism and the severity of legalism by rooting discernment in God's Word.

Secondly, leaders must model repentance in their own lives. Jesus's injunction to 'first remove the log' applies especially to pastors and elders, who are called to shepherd the flock not by asserting superiority but by embodying humility. When leaders acknowledge their own need for grace, they create space for a culture of gentle correction within the church.

Thirdly, discipline must be structured with restoration as its goal. The biblical pattern in Matthew 18:15–20 and Galatians 6:1 envisions a process that begins privately and escalates publicly only when necessary, always with the aim of healing rather than humiliation. Discipline thus becomes not punitive but an extension of God's sanctifying work within the covenant community.

Finally, prudence is required in proclamation. Matthew 7:6 reminds the church that what is sacred must be stewarded wisely. Evangelism and teaching demand discernment about when truth will be constructively received, with whom it must be wisely shared, and when it will be trampled. Prudence guards the church against both indiscriminate disclosure and elitist exclusion, ensuring that the gospel is proclaimed with wisdom and integrity.

From theological insight to pastoral practice

The central challenge for the church today is not to choose between truth and kindness but to embody both. A congregation shaped by Matthew 7:1–6 will engage in correction only after self-examination, warn with compassion rather than triumphalism, and will speak truth as an act of love. As Bonhoeffer (1954:107) observed, 'Nothing can be crueler than the leniency which abandons others to their sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke which calls another Christian in one's community back from the path of sin'.

When the church recovers this gospel logic of redemptive judgement – rooted in the cross and practiced in humility – it ceases to function as a moral fortress and becomes instead a healing refuge where truth and grace meet (Ps 85:10). Churches embody restorative judgement by catechising conscience, modelling repentance in leadership, structuring discipline for restoration, and exercising prudence in proclamation.

Conclusion

Toward a cross-shaped ethic of judgement

Matthew 7:1–6 does not suspend judgement but redefines it as restorative discernment. The text critiques hypocritical condemnation exposes the blindness of self-righteousness, and insists on prudence in handling what is holy. Read within its canonical and theological context, it summons disciples to a form of judgement that is humble, Spirit-enabled, and accountable before God.

Such an ethic resists cultural relativism, which silences moral truth as well as ecclesial legalism, which weaponises correction. Instead, the passage calls the church to practices of restorative judgement: catechising conscience, modelling repentance in leadership, structuring discipline for healing, and exercising prudence in proclamation. In this way, judgement is transformed from an assertion of superiority into an act of service.

At the cross, God's judgement and mercy converge. From this vantage point, disciples are enabled to correct with humility rather than pride, to speak truth in love rather than harshness, and to pursue holiness without self-exaltation. To 'judge not' is therefore to renounce condemnatory hypocrisy while embracing discernment that restores and builds up. In doing so, the church embodies a cross-shaped ethic of judgement, where mercy and truth meet, and where its life reflects the character of the crucified and risen Lord.

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