

Sermon to the saints of God which are at Topeka – Sunday, May 8, 2016

Two weeks ago, amongst delivering unto us many other edifying concepts, our Elder Ben plainly recognized that gaining a fuller awareness of context is vital to gaining a richer, plainer, and more accurate understanding of Scripture:

“The first thing to do when you want to know what a verse means is to look at the context of the verse.”

– Elder Ben

How true. How helpful. How vital. Before I dive into the sermon topic for today and, Lord willing, next Sunday, I would like to enlarge upon the concept of *context* a little more – we each stand in need of all the help we can get in understanding the meaning of scripture and therefore what we are commanded by our King to do – and how to do it – that we may more humbly and fully submit ourselves unto our King and ‘rightly divide the word of truth’ as it plays out practically, on the ground, in our lives.

When reading the Bible, taking meanings of words, phrases and verses out of context generally tends to lead us astray in our understanding. For instance, nearly the whole world takes the phrase "God is love" (in 1Jn 4:7-16) out of its proper context, thereby causing many to erroneously come away thinking that God loves everything and everyone at all times with a gushing, romantic, or sentimental love that is not at all helpful in understanding what the Holy Spirit, through John’s pen, conveys. But in its literal and grammatical context, “love” here refers to *agape* love, the essence of which is a deep, approbational, sincere love that is manifested by the vital sacrifice for the benefit of another - not a sentimental, romantic love. The historical context is also crucial, because John was immediately addressing believers in the first century church and instructing them not only on God’s love per se, but also on how to identify true believers from false professors. True Christian love—the sacrificial, beneficial kind—is the mark of the true believer. Furthermore, considering the phrase "God is love" in the context of all of Scripture (synthesis) will keep us from coming to the false, and all-too-common, conclusion that God is *only* love or that His love is greater than all His other attributes, or renders any of his other perfect attributes as less relevant - which is simply not the case. We know from many other passages that God is also holy and righteous, faithful and trustworthy, full of grace and merciful, kind and compassionate, omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient, as well as jealous, terrible, wrathful and that God not only loves, but He also hates – and that the love of God is reserved for the penitent – and that such penitence bestowed upon a heart is a true earmark or manifestation of His love.

The scripture is God's Word. But many of the interpretations derived from it are not. This does not mean that the Bible is a confusing document. Rather, the problem lies in those who interpret it – and thereby the motivations and the methods they use in interpreting and applying it. Because we are sinners, we are incapable of interpreting God's word perfectly all of the time. The body, mind, will, and emotions are affected by sin and make 100% interpretive accuracy impossible. This does not mean that accurate understanding of God's Word is impossible. But it does mean that we need to approach His word with care, diligence, humility and reason. Additionally, and most importantly, we need, to the extent that the Lord blesses us with a supply, the guidance of the Holy Spirit in interpreting God's Word (and let us all therefore constantly cry out to the Lord in dire, stark recognition of our need for it!)

Improper, lazy or ill-motivated methodology in interpreting Scripture is nothing new. 2 Peter 3:16 warns both those of the first century New Testament church and others down the line – all the way to us and beyond - that mishandling the Word of God is very dangerous stuff. Indeed, mishandling the Word of God is a path to destruction. Contrary to the practices of some false teachers in and around Corinth at the time, the apostle Paul assured his readers that he faithfully handled the Word of God (2Cor. 4:2) – an example that we are always to follow.

The Bible teaches that God is not the author of confusion (1 Cor. 14:33). What a passage of Scripture means is fixed by the author (God) and is not subject to alterations by readers. “Meaning” is determined by the author (God); it is discovered by (some) readers. The scripture is clear:

"Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation." - 2 Peter 1:20

Our goal must be *exegesis* (or drawing the proper, intended meaning out of the text), and not *eisogesis* (or superimposing meaning onto the text to suit our flesh). Nearly all false doctrines taught by Christians and false religionists alike can be traced to a distortion of both contextual meaning and the meaning of Biblical words. With that in mind, here are some simple clear rules of context and meaning that may be useful to you when reading scripture.

1) DEFINITION: What does the word mean? Any study of Scripture must begin with a study of words. Define your terms and then keep to the terms defined. The interpreter should conscientiously abide by the plain meaning of the words. We must not violate the known usage of a word and invent another for which there is no precedent. This quite often may require using a Strong’s Hebrew to English or Greek to English lexicon in order to make sure that the sense of the English translation is understood (rather than simply superimposing our colloquial understanding of its meaning onto the word). An example of this is the two Greek words *allos* and *heteros*. Both are usually translated as "another" in English - yet *allos* literally means "another of the same type" and *heteros* means literally "another of a different type."

2) USAGE: It must be remembered that the Old Testament was written originally by, to and for Jews. The words and idioms must have been intelligible to them - just as the words of Christ when talking to them must have been. The majority of the New Testament likewise was written in the context of Greco-Roman culture as well as a mixing of it, to perhaps a lesser extent, with the Hebrew culture (generally in light of OT scripture that is drawn forth, or restated, to amplify a point or to reveal its prophetic accuracy) - and it is important to not impose our modern usage of these words and expressions into our interpretation. We run the risk of producing an inaccurate and ineffectual rendering of scripture when we impose pre-conceived notions and cultural biases onto the words and phrases we read.

3) PROXIMITY CONTEXT: The meaning must be gathered from the context. Every word you read must be understood in the light of the words that come before and after it. Many passages will not be understood at all, or understood incorrectly, without the help afforded by proximity context. A glaring example of this is the Mormon error of using 1 Cor. 8:5b: "***...for there be gods many and lords many...***" as a "proof text" of their unlearned and blasphemous doctrine of polytheism ("As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be"). However, a simple reading of the whole verse in the context of the whole chapter (where Paul calls these gods "so-called"), plainly demonstrates that Paul is not teaching polytheism. Seeking and finding the intended meaning of scripture necessitates interpreting Bible verses in context. Every word in the Bible is part of a verse, and every verse is part

of a paragraph, and every paragraph is part of the book, and every book is part of the whole of Scripture. No verse of Scripture can be divorced from the verses around it. Interpreting a verse apart from its context is more problematic than trying to analyze a Rembrandt painting by looking at only a single square inch of the painting. The proximity context is absolutely critical to properly interpreting Bible verses.

In interpreting Scripture, there is both an immediate context and a broader context. The immediate context of a verse is the paragraph (or paragraphs) of the biblical book in question. The immediate context should always be consulted in interpreting Bible verses. The broader context is the whole of Scripture. The entire Holy Scripture is the context and guide for understanding the particular passages of Scripture. We must keep in mind that the correct interpretation of a specific passage will never contradict the total teaching of Scripture on a point (it is only our lack of understanding that ever makes it seem so). Individual verses do not exist as isolated fragments, but as parts of a whole. The exposition of these verses, therefore, must involve exhibiting them in right relation both to the whole and to each other. Scripture interprets Scripture.

4) HISTORICAL CONTEXT: The interpreter must strive to gain some awareness of the life and society of the times in which the Scripture was written. The spiritual principle will be timeless but often can't be fully appreciated without some 'broad strokes' knowledge of the background. The Christian faith is based on historical fact – events that indeed transpired as created, directed and wholly effectuated for God's glory and for our benefit. Indeed, Christianity rests on the foundation of the historical Jesus whose earthly ministry and time represents God's full and objective self-communication to humankind (John 1:18). Jesus was seen and heard by human beings as God's ultimate revelation (1 John 1:1-3). Christ proclaimed that "If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also" (John 14:7).

Historical context plays a very large part in Bible interpretation, yet many today seem to forget it. First of all, to truly understand the Bible, you must have at least some familiarity with the Jewish language, beliefs, and practices at the time of the biblical writing. Otherwise many terms, idiomatic phrases (Hebraisms), and sayings in the Scriptures will make little to no sense to us today. Even for most of the New Testament writings, we must attempt an understanding of what was happening in the first century when they were written. We must at least strive to broadly understand their practices, their terminology, the social issues of the time, etc., as much as we can. We must also look to the original Bible text languages of the time (Greek and Hebrew) as they were understood, meant and intended at the time, to those being addressed. We cannot merely take our modern language understanding of English and try to force first-century Greek into it.

5) SPEAKER AND AUDIENCE: While we know, and are greatly comforted by the idea that the whole of scripture is penned by the Holy Spirit of God – and all who read it end up glorifying and magnifying His Holy name, either in honor or in dishonor in response to it, it is important to our understanding of any specific passage of scripture to keep in mind who, practically and specifically, is speaking – as well as who is being spoken to in that passage. We witness many deeply flawed and misapplied notions by those who wrest scripture to their own destruction when making the error of not properly contextualizing speaker and audience in scripture. A glaring example of this is found in both the epistles written to specific churches and in the general epistles found in the New Testament. In the salutation of Ephesians (1:1), we read: ***'Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus:'*** We know that this letter is penned specifically to both the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus. Understanding the audience itself is crucial to rightly understanding and applying what is written thereafter – whereas many who pass over this important framing

haughtily and erroneously infer that everything written in that epistle already applies to them in their state of unbelief and thereby give themselves misguided license.

6) LOGIC: Interpretation is merely logical reasoning. When interpreting Scripture, the use of reason is everywhere to be assumed. Does the interpretation make sense? The Bible was given to us in the form of human language and therefore appeals to human reason - it invites investigation. It is to be interpreted as we would any other volume: it comports to the laws of language, logic and grammatical analysis that God designed us with. It is the main mode of God's communication of His truths to us (a balancing of this rule is spoken to in point #9).

7) INFERENCE: An inference is a fact reasonably implied from another fact. It is a logical consequence. It derives a conclusion from a given fact or premise. It is the deduction of one proposition from another proposition (or valid argument form). Such inferential facts or propositions are sufficiently binding when their truth is established by competent and satisfactory evidence (or, sound argument). Competent evidence means such evidence as the nature of the thing to be proved admits. Satisfactory evidence means that amount of proof which would ordinarily satisfy an unprejudiced mind beyond a reasonable doubt. Jesus used this rule when he proved the resurrection of the dead to the unbelieving Sadducees in Matthew 22:23-33.

8) GENRE JUDGMENT: A "literal" approach to Scripture recognizes that the Bible contains a variety of literary genres, each of which has certain peculiar characteristics that must be recognized in order to aid understanding of the text.

In the Old Testament: The first 5 books of the Bible are called the Pentateuch, which is Hebrew for the number 5 – or the books of the law (Genesis - Deuteronomy). The next 17 books are mostly historical books, while a few are considered more poetic and proverbial (Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon). The next 5 books are the major prophets (Isaiah - Daniel). The next 12 books are minor prophets (Hosea - Malachi). In the New Testament, the first 4 books are the gospel accounts of Christ's ministry on earth (Matthew - John). The next one is historic (Acts) of Christ's disciples during the early formation of the New Testament churches. The next 14 books are the epistles (Romans - Hebrews), which are letters addressing specific problems and much in the way of providing sound doctrinal solutions. The next 7 books are more general epistles (James - Jude). And the last book is largely prophetic (Revelation). An incorrect genre judgment may lead one far astray in rightly interpreting Scripture. A parable should not be treated as history, nor should poetic prose or prophesy (both of which contain many symbols) be treated as straightforward narrative. The wise interpreter allows his knowledge of genres to help guide how he approaches each individual biblical text. In this way, he can be aided in determining what the Holy Spirit, through the specific biblical author, was intending to communicate to the reader. And even though the Bible contains a variety of literary genres and many figures of speech, the biblical authors most often employed literal statements to convey their ideas. Where they use a literal means to express their ideas, the Bible expositor must employ a corresponding means to explain these ideas - namely, a literal approach (even in the understanding of metaphors). A literal method of interpreting Scripture gives to each word in the text the same basic meaning it would have in normal, ordinary, customary usage - whether employed in writing, speaking, or thinking. Without such a method, communication between God and man would be problematic at best – and we know that ***'God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints.'* – 1Cor 14:33**

9) DEPENDENCE UPON THE HOLY SPIRIT: Scripture tells us that we are to rely on the Holy Spirit's illumination to gain insights into the meaning and application of Scripture (John 16:12-15, 1 Corinthians 2:9-11). The Holy Spirit, as the "Spirit of truth" (John 16:13), guides us:

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. – 1Cor. 2:12

This is logical: full comprehension of the Word of God is impossible without prayerful dependence on the Spirit of God, for He who inspired the Word (2 Peter 1:21) is also its supreme and infallible interpreter. Human beings cannot understand God's Word apart from God's divine power (Eph.4:18) – our carnal minds and understanding are otherwise completely darkened and shrouded by sin. This aspect of the Holy Spirit's ministry operates within the sphere of man's rational capacity, which God Himself gave man (Gen.2-3). Illumination comes to the 'minds' of God's people as gifted in an outpouring of His Spirit - not to some non-rational faculty like our 'emotions' or our 'feelings', or purely an intellectual faculty as in those who are thought of by the world as 'intellectual,' who are ***'ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.'*** (2Tim. 3:7) The ministry of the Holy Spirit in interpretation does not mean interpreters can ignore common sense and logic. Since the Holy Spirit is "the Spirit of truth" (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13), He does not teach concepts that fail to meet the tests of truth. In other words, the Holy Spirit doesn't guide into interpretations that contradict each other or fail to have logical, internal consistency. It must also be kept in mind that the function of the Holy Spirit is not to communicate to the minds of His people any doctrine or meaning of Scripture that is not contained already in Scripture itself. Indeed, the function of the Spirit is not to communicate new truth or to instruct in matters unknown, but to illuminate the minds of his blessed sheep on what is revealed in Scripture. The Holy Spirit supernaturally energizes the rational faculties of His people to discernment:

For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. - 2Ti 1:7,

Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. - 1Co 2:13

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. - 2Ti 2:15

2 Timothy 3:15 points to the complete sufficiency of Scripture in the life of a believer, and indicates that the Scriptures alone are sufficient to provide the necessary wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ. The Scriptures alone are the source of spiritual knowledge. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us that: ***"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."*** Let us therefore examine them with the utmost care and diligence.

I hope that somewhere in this brief discussion of context, you find something that is helpful and edifying.

Now to the main text of today's sermon topic:

Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye. Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you. Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him? Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets. – Matt. 7:1-12

Elder Ben preached a refreshing and edifying sermon on the most bastardized verse in the Bible – John 3:16. I submit to you that following closely behind as another of the most bastardized verses in the New Testament (both by 'Christians' and more generally by those who demand license for and sterilization of all sin and no calling out, rebuke or admonition for any sin) is Matthew 7:1. Certainly, we have each heard our fair share of the perversions and misapplications of this verse of scripture – mostly in conjunction with our street preaching and web ministry activity. When I first arrived at this little church of God some 15 years ago, I was very shortly thereafter given what at the time, and for many years thereafter, was an interpretation of this verse that seemed wholly satisfying – namely, that this verse admonishes against substituting one's own judgment, or sense of right and wrong, for God's. This explanation stuck with me, and it is certainly sound doctrine never to make or preach or hold in one's mind and heart such a vain substitution. I humbly submit to you dear brothers and sisters, that there is much more going on in this preachment by our Lord Jesus Christ. And further, in view of the 11 verses that immediately follow from Christ, and specifically tying verses 1, 6 and 12 together, I believe that we are given a rich, specific, overarching framework for governing our spirits in matters of discernment, admonition, rebuke, reproof, exhortation and proper forbearance, with all longsuffering and doctrine (2Tim. 4:2). So, if you will bear with me, I begin to take the issue up now, and Lord willing, tie things together next Sunday.

The English words judge and judgment, rendered from both the Hebrew and Greek texts of scripture, have a variety of scriptural meanings, even inside the idea that the actual number of Hebrew and Greek words rendered as judge, judgment or judgest is relatively few. Here are some examples:

Ge 15:14 And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance. The Hebrew word rendered as judge here is *diyn* (deen), and has several applicable meanings – 1. to act as judge, 2. to administer judgment, 3. to plead a cause, 4. to execute judgment, 5. to requite or vindicate, 6. to govern, 7. to contend or strive

Le 19:15 Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour. The Hebrew word here is *shaphat* (shah-fat) – 1. to act as law-giver or judge or governor (of God, man), 2. to rule, govern, judge, 3. to decide controversy (of God, man), 4. to execute judgment, 5. discriminating (of man), 6. vindicating, condemning and punishing

Most of the time when we see the word judge, or judgest, or judgment in the Old Testament, we see the original Hebrew words *diyn* or *shaphat*, but as you can guess from the variety of possible meanings of the original words, not every one of those possible definitions applies every time one of the words is used. Here are some further examples:

De 1:16 And I charged your judges at that time, saying, Hear the causes between your brethren, and judge righteously between every man and his brother, and the stranger that is with him. – shaphat

Job 22:13 And thou sayest, How doth God know? Can he judge through the dark cloud? – shaphat

In the New Testament, the English words 'judge' or 'judgement' are put for a handful of Greek words (with the notable exception of when the Lord Jesus Christ's uses the word 'judge' from the Hebrew *diyn*):

Col 2:16 Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: The Greek here is *krino* (kree-no) 1) to separate, put asunder, to pick out, select, choose, 2) to approve, esteem, to prefer, 3) to be of opinion, deem, think, to be of opinion, 4) to determine, resolve, decree, 5) to judge, 5a) to pronounce an opinion concerning right and wrong, 5a1) to be judged, i.e. summoned to trial that one's case may be examined and judgment passed upon it, 5b) to pronounce judgment, to subject to censure, 5b1) of those who act the part of judges or arbiters in matters of common life, or pass judgment on the deeds and words of others, 6) to rule, govern, 6a) to preside over with the power of giving judicial decisions, because it was the prerogative of kings and rulers to pass judgment, 7) to contend together, of warriors and combatants, 7a) to dispute, 7b) in a forensic sense, 7b1) to go to law, have a suit at law.

1Co 14:29 Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. The Greek here is *diakrino* (dy-a-kree-no) - 1) to separate, make a distinction, discriminate, to prefer, 2) to learn by discrimination, to try, decide, 2a) to determine, give judgment, decide a dispute, 3) to withdraw from one, desert, 4) to separate one's self in a hostile spirit, to oppose, strive with dispute, contend, 5) to be at variance with one's self, hesitate, doubt

Ac 24:10 Then Paul, after that the governor had beckoned unto him to speak, answered, Forasmuch as I know that thou hast been of many years a judge unto this nation, I do the more cheerfully answer for myself: The Greek here is *krites* (kree-tays) - 1) one who passes or arrogates to himself, judgment on anything, 1a) an arbiter, 1b) of a Roman procurator administering justice, 1c) of God passing judgment on men, 1d) of the leaders or rulers of the Israelites

Joh 7:24 Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment. The Greek here is *krisis* (kree-sees) - 1) a separating, sundering, separation, 1a) a trial, contest, 2) selection, 3) judgment, 3a) opinion or decision given concerning anything, 3a1) esp. concerning justice and injustice, right or wrong, 3b) sentence of condemnation, damnatory judgment, condemnation and punishment, 4) the college of judges (a tribunal of seven men in the several cities of Palestine; as distinguished from the Sanhedrin, which had its seat at Jerusalem), 5) right, justice

Here are a few more examples:

2Co 5:14 For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead:
- *krino*

1Co 11:13 Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered? - krino

Ro 2:27 And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature, if it fulfil the law, judge thee, who by the letter and circumcision dost transgress the law? - krino

Ro 2:16 In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel. – krino

Rom. 2:1 Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things. - krino

Ac 17:31 Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead. - krino

Ac 4:19 But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. - krino

Joh 12:47 And if any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. - krino

Joh 8:26 I have many things to say and to judge of you: but he that sent me is true; and I speak to the world those things which I have heard of him. - krino

Lu 12:57 Yea, and why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right? - diyn

As we can see, although the number of different Hebrew and Greek words translated into the English version of the Bible as judge – or some derivative from that root, is relatively small, the number of possible meanings is somewhat extensive – sometimes only one meaning is intended and sometimes several possible meanings combine to give a better sense of what is meant – but rarely do we see the English word rendered in context include all of the possible meanings of that original Hebrew or Greek word at one time. So back to Matt. 7:1-2:

Matt. 7:1-2 Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. The Greek here is krino

We know that, in this context, Christ could not be admonishing the people against pronouncing an opinion concerning moral right and wrong, or anything that implies a similar sentiment or idea, in that it would not be internally consistent with the rest of scripture. We are vigorously commanded throughout scripture to judge righteously, which means to measure any and all conduct against God's plainly pronounced standard. And while there is no doctrinal flaw in warning anyone, at any time, against substituting God's sense of right and wrong for our own (with respect to His moral law), I humbly submit to you that, in this context, the fuller meaning has the Lord admonishing us against desiring to hop up into the judgment seat, so to speak, and quickly and quite uncharitably take on the role for ourselves as a judge - pronouncing judgment, or subjecting to censure or punishment. In short – I am convinced that this is a stern admonition by our Lord Jesus Christ to avoid, at all costs, a harshly censorious spirit – which is opposed to and the enemy of the charitable spirit which should rightly rule in the heart of the Christian. I am similarly convinced that both proximity and global context (supported by the whole of scripture) of the passage bears this meaning out - and I am further convinced that this admonition is

'bookended' by the twin admonition given at Matt. 7:6 – which I will attempt to open for us next Sunday. Finally, I am persuaded that these meanings are tied together as opposite extremes to avoid – and an overarching sense of how we are to apply our 'judgment' to all matters of conduct by verse 12 of the same chapter.

We can see that in the verses themselves, at least a couple different things are going on here.

Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. – Matt. 7:1-2

It is clear that in telling us not to judge, it is not meant that we do nothing at all with respect to the use of 'judgment' as a way of rightly construing conduct as either sinful or not – as first of all, we are commanded to make such determinations, and would be in violation of God's plain commandments in doing otherwise. But more glaringly, we see that in the first verse, it is the nature, or character, of judgment involved, that is been warned against – because in the second verse, it is the specific nature, or character of the individual, in their judging, that will be applied back against them. If 'judge not' in the first verse meant to do nothing, then nothing would be applied, or done, back to the do-nothing (which is convoluted, and would not therefore be a plainly applied admonition of the Lord). And given the context of the passage expressed, verses 1 through 12, I believe that a specific nature of conduct, or state of mind and heart *in* judgment, or a censorious and harshly critical spirit, is meant in verse 1 – and a converse and just as dangerous extreme is set forth in verse 6, and that verse 12 firmly and properly provides the commanded guardrails, so to speak, against veering to either extreme - after having already characterized both extremes.

For now, with regard to the analysis of verses 1-5, I have been aided and comforted by some words from our spiritual brother Jonathan Edwards, as well as others.

So, this notion of a censorious spirit – it is purely driven by the flesh and is therefore vile, depraved and Satanic, and can manifest itself in both a reprobate man (as he has no real option against sowing to the spirit, having been given no spiritual capacity by our merciful God as of yet in his life) as well as rear its ugly head amongst the elect of God, as a by-product of sowing to the flesh instead of to the Spirit (which we are all both prone to do and actually do, day to day, in our lives) in such matters. The obvious application to the unregenerate man is not to be discussed here much. However, many a Christian has fallen into and cocooned himself in a censorious spirit as one of the justifications of his faith (at least in his own mind) – a spirit which is at times so subtle and at others so blatant, that it both whispers and screams contempt against the mature spirit of charity which gives it no satisfaction. Edwards: *Charity, in one of the common uses of the expression, signifies a disposition to think the best of others that the case will allow. This, however, is not the scriptural meaning of the word charity, but only one way of its exercise, or one of its many and rich fruits. Charity is of vastly larger extent than this. It signifies the same as Christian or divine love, and so is one and the same as the Christian spirit. And, in accordance with this view, we find the spirit of charitable judging mentioned among many other good fruits of charity, and (also by) by denying the contrary fruit (to work in us), or censoriousness - a disposition to uncharitably judge or censure others. With respect to this, the apostle declares, that charity "thinketh no evil."*

The nature of a censorious spirit, or a disposition uncharitably to judge others, consists in a disposition to think evil of others, or to judge evil of them, with respect to three things: 1. their state, 2. their qualities, 3. their actions.

1. A censorious spirit shows a forwardness to judge evil of the state of others. It often shows itself in a disposition to think the worst of those about us, whether they are men of the world or professing Christians. In respect to the

latter class, it often leads persons to pass censure on those who are professors of religion, and to condemn them as being hypocrites or being bereft of grace. Here, however, extremes are to be avoided. Some persons are very apt to be overly positive, from little things that they observe in others, in determining that they are godly men; others are forward, from just as little evidences, to be overly positive in condemning others as not having the least degree of grace in their hearts, and as being strangers to Christ. But all cases of being overly positive in this sense seems to be without warrant from the Word of God. God seems there to have reserved the positive determination of the state of a man's heart to himself, as a thing to be kept in his own hands, as the great and only searcher of the hearts of the children of men.

Persons are guilty of censoriousness in condemning the state of others, when they will do it from things that are swept up into a pile of their being in a bad estate, or when they will condemn others as hypocrites because of God's providential dealings with them, as Job's three friends condemned him as a hypocrite on account of his uncommon and severe afflictions. And the same is true when they condemn them for the failings they may see in them, and which are no greater than often occur with God's children – though they are just as prone to think well of themselves as Christians. And so persons are censorious when they condemn others as being unconverted and carnal men because they differ from them in opinion on some points that are not fundamental, or when they judge ill of their state from what they observe in them, not making due allowances for their natural, or idiosyncratic, temperament, or for their manner or want of some specific scriptural education, or other peculiar disadvantages under which they labor, — or when they are ready to reject all as irreligious and unconverted men, because their experiences do not in everything line up with their own; setting up themselves, and their own experience, as a standard and rule to all others; not being sensible of that vast variety and liberty which the Spirit of God permits and uses in his saving work on the hearts of men, and how mysterious and inscrutable his ways often are, and especially in this great work of making men new creatures in Christ Jesus. In all these ways, men often act, not only censoriously, but as unreasonably (in not allowing any to be Christians who have not their own experiences) as if they would not allow any to be men who had not just their own stature, and the same strength, or temperament of body, or skill set, and the very same features of temperament with themselves.

2. A censorious spirit shows a forwardness to judge evil of the *qualities* of others. It appears in a disposition to overlook their good qualities, or to think them destitute of such qualities when they are not, or to make very little of them; or to magnify their ill qualities, and make more of them than is just, or relevant; or to charge them with those ill qualities that they have not – faintly constructing them from dubious, vague or irrelevant examples. Some are very apt to charge others with ignorance and folly, and other contemptible qualities, when they in no sense deserve to be esteemed by them in such a manner. Some seem very apt to entertain a very low and despicable opinion of others, when a more charitable disposition would discern many good things in them, to balance or more than balance the evil charged. And some are ready to charge others with those morally evil qualities that they themselves are free from – either in temperament or situation, or to charge them with such qualities in a much higher degree than they at all deserve, not properly considering each's burden, lack of experience or ignorance. A censorious spirit causes some to have such a prejudice against some of their neighbors, that they regard them as a great deal more proud, more selfish, or spiteful, or malicious, or foolish, than they really are. Through some deep and carnally (and therefore inappropriate) prejudice they have developed against them, they are ready to conceive that they have all manner of bad qualities, and no good ones. A person may seem to them to be an exceeding proud, or covetous, or selfish, or in some way bad, sort, when it may be that to others they appear well. Others see their many good qualities, and also see, perhaps, manifestations of the qualities that are not good; but the censorious spirit sees (and focuses) mainly on that which is evil, and speaks only that which is unjust and disparaging as to the qualities of others.

3. A censorious spirit shows a forwardness to judge evil of the *actions* of others. By actions, here, is meant all the external voluntary acts of men, whether consisting in words or deeds. And a censorious spirit in judging evil

of others' actions manifests itself in two things: First, in judging them to be guilty of evil actions without any evidence that constrains them to such a judgment (whether they express such judgment to others, or simply hold them firmly and unchangeably in their own mind, the spirit is the same – and is dangerous). A suspicious spirit, which leads persons to be jealous or overly wary and distrusting of others, and ready to suspect them of being guilty of evil things when they have no evidence of it whatever, is an uncharitable spirit, and contrary to Christianity. Some persons are very free in passing their censures on others with respect to those things that they suppose they do out of their sight, extrapolating small evidence seen into larger evidence concocted or imagined). They are ready to believe that they commit this, and that, and the other evil deed, in secret, and that, from some design or motive, they keep these things hid from others that are not in the same interest with themselves. These are the persons chargeable with the “evil surmisings” spoken of and condemned by the apostle (1 Tim. 6:4, and which are connected with “envy, strife, and railings.”) Persons show an uncharitable and censorious spirit with respect to the actions of others, by being forward to take up and circulate careless and incomplete evil reports about them. (*This is not at all an admonition against appropriately and discreetly Christians seeking for and getting counsel on how to help a brother or sister whose conduct or frame of mind is in obvious need of help). A censorious spirit will drive a man to be ready to catch up an ill report, take it in as true, without examination, or getting and considering all the facts, against the counsel and commandment given:

He that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbour, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour. - Ps 15:3

A censorious spirit tends to put the worst constructions on the actions of others. The censorious are not only apt to judge others guilty of evil actions without sufficient evidence, but they are also prone to put a bad construction on their actions, when they will just as well, and perhaps better, admit of a good construction. Very often, the moving design and end in the action is secret, confined to the recesses of the actor's own bosom; this is a kind of censoriousness and uncharitable judging, as common as any other.

The question may be asked now, or even only part way into the discussion of a censorious spirit: “Wherein lies the evil of judging ill of others, since it is not true that all judging ill of others is unlawful? And where are the lines to be drawn?”

We are not obliged to divest ourselves of scriptural reasoning, that we judge well of all men in all circumstances – on the contrary. This would be plainly against reason; for Christian charity is not a thing founded on the ruins of reason, but there is the most sweet harmony between reason and charity. And therefore we are not forbidden to judge all persons when there is plain and clear evidence that they are justly chargeable with evil, continual folly, or a disorderly walk. We act with a right and charitable spirit, when we judge men who have made a profession of faith, yet maintain a disorderly walk, with plain and satisfying evidence, after forbearance, much counsel and longsuffering. We also do not run afoul of a charitable spirit in judgment when we see those to be wicked men, and poor Godless wretches, who give flagrant proof that they are so by a course of wicked action. *“Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after.”* (1Tim. 5:24) That is, some men's sins are such plain testimony against them, that they are sufficient to condemn them as wicked men in full sight of the world, even before the coming of that final judgment of our King that shall disclose the secrets of the heart to all. So some men's actions give such clear evidence of the evil of their intentions, that it is no judging the secrets of the heart, to judge that their designs and ends are wicked. And therefore it is plain, that all judging as to others' state, or qualifications, or actions, is not an uncharitable censoriousness. But the evil of that judging wherein censoriousness consists, lies in two things: —

First it lies in judging evil of others when evidence does not oblige such judgment, or in thinking ill of them when the case very well allows of thinking well of them; when those things that seem to be in their favor are overlooked,

and only those that are against them are regarded, and when the latter are magnified, and too great stress laid on them. And the same is the case when persons are hasty and rash in judging and condemning others, though both prudence and charity oblige them to suspend their judgment till they know more of the matter, and all the circumstances are plain before them. A person may show a great deal of rashness, or lack of charitable judgment, in freely censuring others, whether publicly or inside their own bosom, before they have heard what a person may have to say in their defense.

He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him. - Pro. 18:13

Second, a censorious spirit lies in some form of private pleasure, or contentment, in discovering ill in others. Persons may rightly judge ill of others, from clear and plain evidence that compels them to it, and yet it may be to their grief that they are obliged to judge as they do; just as when a tender parent hears of some great crime of a child with such evidence that he cannot but think it true. But very often judgment is passed against others, in such a manner as shows that the individual is well pleased in passing it. He is so forward in judging evil, and judges on such slight evidence, and carries his judgment to such extremes, as shows that his inclination is in it, and that he loves to think the worst of others.. It may be in speaking of them with ridicule, or an air of contempt, or in bitterness or maliciousness of spirit, or with manifest pleasure in their deficiencies or errors. When to judge ill of others is against the inclination of persons, they will be very cautious in doing it, and will go no further in it than evidence obliges them, and will think the best that the nature of the case will admit, and will put the best possible construction on the words and actions of others. And when they are obliged, against their inclination, to think evil of another, it will be no pleasure to declare it, but they will be backward to speak of it to any, and will do so only when a sense of duty leads them to it, as in getting counsel from a brother or sister about it, or carefully applying some admonition or rebuke as a given and carefully considered remedy. I want to make it clear that I intend no exalting of style over substance here – there are many times when good, plain, strong words of exhortation or admonition are precisely what the Lord has prescribed for us to apply to a situation, especially in situations where counsel has already been given and seemingly disregarded or not fully taken.

A rash, or harshly censorious spirit in judgment is so contrary to a charitable spirit, and can be illuminated by the following characteristics of the natural man, and it can be all out war to guard against it:

First, people are not naturally prone to think evil of themselves. They are very ready to think well of their own qualifications, and therefore inclined to think the best of their own state (or at least make justifications for whatever state they are in, by piling on the circumstances of their own lot or life as being more to endure than the next man). If there be anything in them that resembles grace, they are exceeding apt to think that their state is good; and so they are ready to think well of their own words and deeds, and very backward to think evil of themselves in any of these respects. And the reason is, that they have a great love to themselves. And, therefore, if they loved their neighbor as themselves, love would have the same tendency with respect to the other.

Second, people are not naturally prone to think evil of those who they consider ‘loved ones’ Thus we see it is in men toward those that are their closest personal friends, and thus it is in parents toward their children. They are very ready to think well of them, and to think the best of their qualifications, whether natural or moral (at times even when in the absence of evidence to make the proper case). They are much more backward than others to take up evil reports of them, and slow to believe what is said against them. They are forward to put the most favorable constructions on their actions. And the reason is, because they love them. If they sincerely loved their neighbor as much as they did those closest to them, love would have the same tendency with respect to the other.

Third, people have a natural tendency to ‘pile on’ in times of conflict. When persons fall out, and there is a difficulty between them, and anger and prejudice arise, and ill-will is contracted, there is always a forwardness to judge the worst of each other; an aptness to think meanly of each other’s qualifications, and to imagine they discover in each other a great many evil qualities, and some that are particularly nefarious. And each is apt to entertain jealousies of what the other may do when absent and out of sight; and apt to put the worst construction on all that he may say or do. And very commonly there is a forwardness to think ill of the condition he is in, and to censure him as a graceless person. And these things show plainly that it is want of Christian love to our neighbor, and the indulgence of a contrary spirit, from which censoriousness arises.

A forwardness to judge and censure others shows a proud disposition, as though the censorious person thought himself to be free from such faults and blemishes, and therefore felt justified in being busy and bitter in charging others with them, and censuring and condemning them for them. This is implied in the language of the Savior:

Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite! – Matt. 7:1-5

Both a beam and a mote (a tiny amount of a substance – think sawdust, in this case) keep a person from seeing clearly, and even a mote can be completely blinding and unbearable. The fact that the beam is bigger, and therefore more invasive and prohibits one from helping his brother with his mote, suggests that there is something bigger going on for him of a destructive, or sinful nature – some bigger, more damaging, sin. The two are both blinded, but the person with the beam cannot really even approach the brother with the mote, even with some sort of homing device, without causing further damage with the beam. It’s completely in the way of offering any help. This does not mean that none of us can help the other without being sin free, as none of us is. It means that there is something that exists that makes it completely prohibitive for any good, meaningful, sincere and effective help to come before the removal of the beam. I submit to you that, in the context of the previous verses (1 and 2), that the beam that is in the eye of the one that prohibits him from offering any effectual, Christian help with the mote IS precisely a censorious spirit in judgment that the preceding verse warn against. ‘Helping’ a brother or sister out, while maintaining a censorious, harshly critical, and uncharitable judging of the matter is the pinnacle of hypocrisy – and is a neatly-disguised enemy of Christian charity. Neatly-disguised, I say, because it hides behind the veneer of pointing to and applying right principles (the moral law of God), but doing so with a wrong spirit.

Edwards: If men were humbly sensible of their own failings, they would not be very forward or pleased in judging others, for the censure passed upon others would but rest on themselves. There are the same kinds of corruption in one man’s heart as in another’s; and if those persons that are most busy in censuring others would but look within, and seriously examine their own hearts and lives, they might generally see the same dispositions and behavior in themselves, at one time or another, which they see and judge in others, or at least something as much deserving of censure. And a disposition to judge and condemn shows a conceited and arrogant disposition. It has the appearance of a person’s setting himself up above others, as though he were fit to be the lord and judge of his fellow-servants, and he supposed they were to stand or fall according to his sentence.

This seems implied in the following language:

He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law; but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge - Jam. 4:11.

That is, you do not act as a fellow-servant to him that you judge, or as one that is under the same law with him, but as the giver of the law, and the judge whose province it is to pass sentence under it. And therefore it is added, in the next verse:

There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who art thou that judgest another? – Jam. 4:12

And so: ***Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. – Rom. 14:4***

God is the only rightful judge, and the thought of his sovereignty and dominion should hold us back from being forward in motivation to harshly judge or censure our fellow-beings. God has threatened, that if we are found censoriously judging and condemning others, we shall be condemned ourselves. —

Judge not (Christ says), that ye be not judged; for with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged. – Matt. 7:1,2

And again: ***And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God? – Rom. 2:3***

These are awful threatenings from the lips of that great Being who is to be our judge at the final day, by whom it infinitely concerns us to be acquitted, and from whom a sentence of condemnation will be unspeakably dreadful to us, if at last we sink forever under it. Therefore, as we would not ourselves receive condemnation from him, let us not mete out such measure to others.

Wherefore, laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil-speakings. – 1Pet. 2:1

My guilt in this is clear to me, and I have asked my God to forgive me of these sins – I also ask your forgiveness. I would also plead with you to ask yourselves, in a quiet moment upon your beds, whether you have not been often guilty of a censorious spirit in judgment; whether you have not frequently censured others, and expressed or even secretly maintained your hard thoughts of them, especially of those with whom you may have had some difficulty, or that have been of a different party, family, age group, personality, temperament or demeanor from yourself. Please consider whether it is a practice that you more or less allow yourself now, from day to day? If so, please consider how contrary it is to the spirit of Christianity, and to the solemn profession which we have made as Christians; and be admonished entirely by the strong moral reasoning from Christ contained in the verses, and forsake it. Finally, please seek the moral reasoning of Matt. 7:1-5, and be encouraged by that reasoning resonating in the following passage of scripture:

Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work, to speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, shewing all meekness unto all men. For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another. But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; - Tit. 3:1-5

Next week, Lord willing, it is my hope to take up at verse 6 of Matthew 7 and move through to verse 12, thus tying this marvelous and persuasive loop of moral reasoning together, that we made be edified together in glory to our King.

I love you all.