

## Lesson 9 Article

### Sermon on the Mount

It should be noted that this passage has erroneously been used to suggest that believers should never evaluate or criticize anyone for anything. Our day hates absolutes, especially theological and moral absolutes, and such simplistic interpretation provides a convenient escape from confrontation. Members of modern society, including many professing Christians, tend to resist dogmatism and strong convictions about right and wrong. Many people prefer to speak of all-inclusive love, compromise, ecumenism, and unity. To the modern religious person those are the only “doctrines” worth defending, and they are the doctrines to which every conflicting doctrine must be sacrificed.

Some years ago a church was looking for a pastor who would emphasize holiness rather than doctrine. I once received a manuscript to review whose primary thesis was that doctrine divides the church. Consequently, the author argued, all doctrine—at least all that might be disagreed with and therefore be divisive—should be eliminated for the sake of the higher goal of unity and fellowship. Right doctrine not only is compatible with true holiness, unity, and fellowship but is absolutely necessary for them to exist. Only right doctrine, biblical doctrine, can teach us what true holiness, unity, and fellowship are—and are not.

In many circles, including some evangelical circles, those who hold to strong convictions and who speak up and confront society and the church are branded as violators of this command not to judge, and are seen as troublemakers or, at best, as controversial. Yet at no time in the history of the church, or of ancient Israel, was spiritual and moral reformation achieved apart from confrontation and conflict. God’s prophets have always been bold and controversial. And they have always been resisted, often by God’s own people. The church reformers of the sixteenth century were men of strong doctrine, conviction, and principle—apart from which the Protestant Reformation would never have come about.

Reformation is needed when spiritual and moral life are low; and for the very reason they are low they will resist every effort to reform. The power of sin, whether in an unbeliever or believer, is opposed to righteousness and will always resist God’s truth and God’s standards. To the carnal person, absolute doctrine and high moral standards are inherently controversial. This Scripture does not teach that we are never to evaluate, criticize, or condemn the *actions* or *teachings* of another person.

The entire thrust of the Sermon on the Mount is to show the complete distinction between true religion and false religion, between spiritual truth and spiritual hypocrisy. Jesus places God’s perfect and holy standards beside the unholy and self-righteous standards of the scribes and Pharisees and declares that those who follow those unholy and self-righteous standards have no part in God’s kingdom (5:20). No more controversial or judgmental sermon has ever been preached.

If this greatest sermon by our Lord teaches anything, it teaches that His followers are to be discerning and perceptive in what they believe and in what they do, that they must make every effort to judge between truth and falsehood, between the internal and the external, between reality and sham, between true righteousness and false: righteousness—in short, between God’s way and all other ways.<sup>1</sup>

Verse 21, by using the word ‘does,’ stresses that the faith which saves is a faith which recognizes Jesus as absolute Lord of the believer’s life; mere verbal assent to His person is not enough. The reality of an individual’s decision to subject himself to Christ’s lordship is demonstrated in his actions, his works. We must be careful to note that Jesus denied that ‘works’ are an entry system into the Kingdom (vv. 21–23); this is a particularly relevant disclaimer, as it safeguards against misinterpreting the sermon and surely removes any possible ambiguity that works can save.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1985). *Matthew*. MacArthur New Testament Commentary (430–431). Chicago: Moody Press.

<sup>2</sup> Mills, M. S. (1999). *The Life of Christ: A Study Guide to the Gospel Record* (Mt 7:15–23). Dallas, TX: 3E Ministries.