

July 28

Lesson 9 (NIV)

SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

DEVOTIONAL READING: Galatians 5:16–

26

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Matthew 7

MATTHEW 7:1–6, 15–23

¹“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ²For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

³“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

⁶“Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.”

¹⁵“Watch out for false prophets. They

come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.

¹⁶By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?

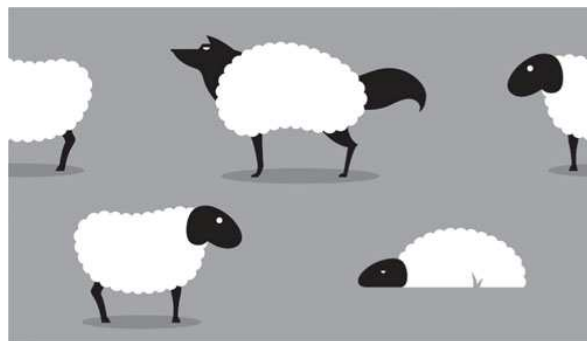
¹⁷Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.

¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

²¹“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

²²Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ ²³Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”



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KEY VERSES

Nickelson, R. L. (Ed.). (2018). *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2018–2019* (Vol. 25). Colorado Springs, CO: Standard Publishing.

Exported from Logos Bible Software, 10:23 AM November 3, 2018.

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. —**Matthew 7:15, 16**

COVENANT IN GOD

Unit 2: A Heartfelt Covenant

LESSONS 5–9

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List principles Jesus gives for evaluating godly behavior.
2. Explain how Jesus' command not to judge applies and does not apply in various situations.
3. Evaluate whether his or her attitude toward a specific person is one of condemnation, godly love, or acceptance of godless behavior.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Legalism vs. Liberty
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Poor Judgment (MATTHEW 7:1–6)
 - A. Warning to Would-Be Judges (vv. 1, 2)
A Gracious Response
 - B. Advice to Obvious Hypocrites

(vv. 3–5)

- C. Plea to Undiscerning Teachers (v. 6)
- II. Telltale Fruits (MATTHEW 7:15–23)
 - A. Fruits of False Prophets (vv. 15–20)
Disguises, Helpful and Otherwise
 - B. Wonders of False Workers (vv. 21–23)

Conclusion

- A. Confessions of a Reformed Legalist
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Corinthians	Ko-rin-thee-unz (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).
Deuteronomy	Due-ter-ahn-uh-me.
Ezra	Ez-ruh.
Galatians	Guh-lay-shunz.
Hosea	Ho-zay-uh.
Pharisees	Fair-ih-seez.

Introduction

A. Legalism vs. Liberty

In 1997, Dean Merrill published his provocative book, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry Church*. The book expresses what many millennials (those born between approximately 1982 and 2004) believed about the church of their par-

ents. Merrill describes a church acting like a moral bully. From its moral high ground of self-righteousness, it bludgeoned the changes occurring in culture. Though sin was running rampant outside the church, the feeling was that sin was absent within. Woe, then, to the member who admitted to moral failure or weakness, for he or she would feel the full wrath of the church. For some, this is the great debate of the church: *legalism or liberty*? Do we draw lines restricting fellowship, or do we open the doors for all to come in without enforcing moral guidelines? (And the debate takes on a different tone when framed as being one of *legalism or liberty or license*?)

No one I know willingly admits to being a legalist, for this is always a negative label, always to be avoided. Legalism does exist, however. At its core it is an orientation that treats rules as more important than people. Legalists often occupy themselves with controlling the behavior of others. Legalism can be an attempt to rally a whole community against sinful behavior. Sadly, in its obsession to crush sin, it may crush sinners instead.

Wouldn't the church be a happier place if we ran off all the legalists? Not so fast. In this lesson, Jesus tells his disciples not to judge, then advises them to judge. Where do we find the balance? Can

we love the law and love people too?

B. Lesson Context

An ordered society (like the nation of Israel in Old Testament times) needs judges to be third-party deciders over human disputes (see [Exodus 18:13-27](#); [Ezra 7:25](#)). [Deuteronomy 25:1](#) defines the role of a judge in Israel as one who makes decisions about “acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty.” To do the opposite — condemn the righteous and justify the wicked — is detestable to the Lord ([Proverbs 17:15](#)). As shown throughout the book of Judges, these leaders were meant to remain faithful to the Lord; only then would the people be led in his ways and enjoy his protection in Israel (see [Judges 2:16-19](#)).

The Lord himself is the final and infallible judge of all the earth ([Psalms 82:8](#); [105:7](#)). In several places, the Bible portrays God as judge over all humanity ([Exodus 12:12](#); [1 Chronicles 16:14](#); [Romans 14:10](#); etc.). God does not consult a legal code for his judgments, because he is the author of the law. Human judges depend on laws and function best when they are enforcing clear and fair laws in an impartial way. People, though, are fallible, and even judges can be corrupt or unrighteous ([Luke 18:6](#)).

Jesus did not embrace the role of judge in human affairs during his min-

istry (see [Luke 12:14](#); in contrast see [Acts 17:31](#); [2 Corinthians 5:10](#)). Yet his teachings are filled with moral distinctions that identify unrighteous behavior. Jesus does not hesitate to expose hypocrites, identify their dishonesty, and thus pass a type of judgment. What we see is Jesus moving beyond mere application of laws in a courtroom setting to a discernment of human behavior based on motives and higher standards such as love for others.

I. Poor Judgment ([MATTHEW 7:1-6](#))

A. Warning to Would-Be Judges (vv. 1, 2)

1. “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.

Jesus previously taught his disciples to trust God rather than worry ([Matthew 6:34](#)). One way to do this is not to be consumed with judging others (compare [Luke 6:37](#); [Romans 14:13](#); [1 Corinthians 4:5](#)). A benefit of honoring this instruction is that others will be less likely to judge you in return.

This verse, taken out of context, is often tossed in the face of Christians by nonbelievers. If Christians offer opinions about any sort of sinful, antisocial, or aberrant behavior, the cynical response is likely to be “I thought Jesus told you not to judge.” Does this mean that Christians

have no moral authority to identify sinful behavior based on biblical standards? While the answer is complicated, Paul later suggests that judgment is reserved for those within the church because they have agreed to be held to the same standards of righteousness ([1 Corinthians 5:12](#); compare [James 4:11](#)).

What Do You Think?

What guardrails can we erect to ensure we do not misuse Scripture when trying to make a point or propose an application?

Digging Deeper

Are the guardrails the same for everyone, or are such guardrails an individual thing? Why?

2. “For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Jesus moves to define his biggest concern: hypocritical judging (see comments on [Matthew 7:5](#)). He warns that when we judge others with our high moral standards, we should beware and be ready: the same high standards and the same judgments will be applied to us in return (compare [Ezekiel 35:11](#); [Mark 4:24](#); [Romans 2:1](#)). The television evangelist who rails against sexual sins from the pulpit and is found to have adulterous liaisons will be shown no mercy by his

critics. The church leader who insists on tithing and giving back to God in a sacrificial way will be pilloried if found to be skimming money from his ministry for his own enrichment.

Jesus illustrates this with an economic practice. It concerns a standard for buying and selling produce such as wheat or barley. Fairness demands that the same *measure* (such as a calibrated basket) be used for both buying and selling (see [Luke 6:38](#)). If someone uses a smaller basket to sell wheat and a bigger basket to buy wheat, that dishonesty will be uncovered and the merchant's credibility will suffer. The first and most basic step for demanding high moral standards is to hold yourself to them.

A GRACIOUS RESPONSE

My grandfather was raised in a church that condemned other Christians for using musical instruments in worship. On our cross-country visits, my father and grandfather always argued over the music issue and other differences in practice among Christians.

Later, I became a close friend of a leader in my grandparents' fellowship. In his early years, he had participated in narrowly defining "the faithful" as those who practiced as he did. But as the leader grew in understanding God's grace, his heart opened to others whose desired to

follow Jesus, even though they disagreed on the particulars.

Some brothers in Christ condemned him with the same spirit in which he had once judged others. On one occasion, I heard this man respond softly, "Christianity began ... with a baby." Focusing on Jesus led him to let some disagreements go. In what ways does following God incarnate call us to more than judgmental legalism?

—C. R. B.

B. Advice to Obvious Hypocrites (vv. 3-5)

3, 4. "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?"

As he often does in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses hyperbole (exaggeration for emphasis) to make his point (see [Matthew 5:29, 30, 38-42](#); etc.). A man can never have a *plank* in his eye while offering to remove a *speck* from another's eye. The absurd picture is of a man with a two-by-four piece of lumber protruding from his face offering to remove a piece of sawdust from another's eye.

First, the plank would get in the way and make the speck removal impossible;

he would be more likely to injure the second person than to help. Second, and more to the point, it is ludicrous for the first person to even think about offering this service when he has such grave personal matters to attend to himself. He has no credibility.

5. “You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

Jesus’ declaring the man with a plank in his eye to be a *hypocrite* is instructive. The word *hypocrite* has a background in Greek drama and refers to an actor, one who plays a role. By implication, this person hides his true identity. What the public sees in the theater does not reveal the actor’s true personal life.

With Jesus’ example, any pretense at hiding is demolished. The hypocrite attempting to extract a tiny speck from his friend’s eye is not concealing a few little specks in his own eyes that no one detects; rather, he has a plank protruding that is easily observed by anyone! Jesus unmasks the judgmental moralists of his day, declaring that all too often their own moral failures are showing.

Jesus advises the obvious: *take the plank out of your own eye*. Then, with unimpaired vision and better mobility to do close work, you can help get the tiny speck out of the other’s eye (see [Galatians](#)

6:1).

What Do You Think?

Under what circumstances will direct confrontation of hypocrisy (example: [Matthew 23:13–15](#)) be better than an indirect approach (example: [Matthew 21:45](#))?

Digging Deeper

What other choices might there be, if any? Why?

C. Plea to Undiscerning Teachers (v. 6)

6. “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.”

Jesus circles back to his disciples, the ones he advises not to judge lest they be judged themselves. He does not want them to be hypocrites like the teachers of the law and Pharisees ([Matthew 6:2, 5, 16](#)), yet Jesus also knows the potential for misuse of his exhortation not to judge. Neglecting to judge wisely allows evil to be called good and good to be called evil ([Isaiah 5:20](#)). In the hands of unrepentant sinners, the directive to avoid judging becomes a license to sin (compare [Jude 4](#)). Reserving judgment is often appropriate and comes with benefits, but Jesus clearly acknowledges that judgment cannot and should not always be avoided.

Jesus uses two vivid metaphors for those against whom he is warning, likely false prophets (see following section). First, he calls them *dogs*. These feral animals will turn and devour one of their own if it falls with a mortal injury. Second, they are called *pigs*, the archetypically unclean animal for Jews, often associated with the worst characteristics of the Gentiles. Jesus' imagery is striking: don't throw beautiful and valuable *pearls* into the mud of the pigpen. Pigs will stomp the pearls into the dirt because they have no concept of their worth.

Many characteristics of Jesus' disciples can be exploited mercilessly by unprincipled opponents of the church. Disciples must find the correct balance and the correct time and place to judge others' motives and character. Jesus tells his disciples they must be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" ([Matthew 10:16](#)). Failure to discern is disastrous in the presence of such dogs and pigs.

II. Telltale Fruits ([MATTHEW 7:15-23](#))

A. Fruits of False Prophets (vv. 15-20)

15. "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."

Jesus issues a warning about *false prophets*, those who would lead his disciples astray by denying Jesus and his teachings (see [Matthew 24:11, 24](#); [Luke 6:26](#)). The image of a wolf wearing a sheepskin to blend in with genuine sheep invites ridicule just as does a person with a plank in his eye performing eye surgery (see [Ezekiel 22:27](#); [Acts 20:29](#)). No wolf should get away with this, especially with the shepherd watching over the flock (see [John 10:5, 11, 14-16](#)). Still, infiltration of the community of God's people by false disciples is all too common. It must be guarded against (see [Jeremiah 23:16](#); [Galatians 2:4](#); [2 Peter 2:1](#); [1 John 4:1](#)).

DISGUISES, HELPFUL AND OTHERWISE

My brother Dave and his wife lived for many years on the shore of a lake in Minnesota. The area between them and their neighbors was covered with oval rocks, brownish-gray in color. Once while I was visiting, Dave and I walked across the rocks to talk to his neighbor. That's when a killdeer, a shorebird, suddenly jumped up from the rocks, ran a few feet, stopped, then ran a few more feet. Dave warned me, "Don't step on her nest." I looked down but didn't see any sign of a nest. Then my brother pointed out the eggs, disguised by their color and shape to blend in with the rocks.

Jesus spoke of false teachers who

disguise themselves to hide their true nature. They are hypocrites who only teach what benefits them. How can we distinguish between the “eggs” in our paths and the “rocks” they imitate?

—C. R. B.

What Do You Think?

How will you know when a context of spiritual wolves calls for a redemptive response, a response of maintaining the church’s purity, or no response at all?

Digging Deeper

How do the following passages inform your answer: [Romans 16:17](#); [1 Corinthians 5](#); [2 Corinthians 2:5-11](#); [1 Timothy 1:13](#); [2 Timothy 2:14-3:9](#); [Titus 3:10](#); [Jude 22, 23](#).

16. “By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?”

How do we detect these false prophets, these fake disciples? These are not inconsistent disciples who struggle to live exemplary lives (a category into which most of us fit). Rather, these are non-disciples who infiltrate the church with allegiance only to themselves, not loyalty to Jesus in any way. We cannot know their hearts like God does, but we can look at their lives. What is the “fruit” of their conduct (compare [Luke 6:44](#);

[James 3:12](#))? If they are not fruits born of the Spirit ([Galatians 5:22, 23](#)), we must suspect false prophets in our midst.

Jesus appeals to the agricultural knowledge of his hearers. No one looks for clusters of grapes among thornbushes. Grapes grow on grapevines. Likewise, no farmer seeks figs among thistles, a variety of weed. Figs grow on fig trees. Good works come from a heart devoted to serving God and loving other people.

17, 18. “Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.”

Jesus knows that recognizing false prophets is not always as simple as discerning between a fig tree and a thistle plant. A good tree with good fruit might look nearly identical to a bad tree with bad fruit. This is like the difference between a crab apple that produces tiny, ill-tasting apples and an apple tree that yields healthy apples of good size and taste. Although the trees may look similar, they are easily distinguished by the fruit they produce.

Some false disciples are masters at hiding their inner identity. They know the community, and they blend in well. The personal lives of those who have influence in the church should be scrutinized. Do they work primarily to enrich

themselves? Do they seek to make disciples of Christ into their own disciples? Are their teachings in conflict with Jesus' teachings? These and other questions must be asked when evaluating the fruit of teachers and leaders ([Matthew 12:33](#); [Luke 6:43](#)).

What Do You Think?

How will you display good spiritual fruit in such a way that neither [Matthew 5:16](#) nor [Matthew 6:1-4](#) is violated?

Digging Deeper

Under what contexts would an anonymous display of good spiritual fruit be called for? Why?

19. “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

The wise farmer has no desire to care for an unproductive fruit *tree*. Instead it will be *cut down* and used for firewood ([Luke 13:7-9](#)). Being *thrown into the fire* is a consistent symbol for God's judgment in this Gospel ([Matthew 3:10, 12; 13:40, 42; 18:8, 9](#); etc.). That is the ultimate fate of the hypocritical false prophets. God knows their hearts and will not be fooled. Their judgment is sure. The bad tree will be replaced by another that will produce *good fruit*.

20. “Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

Jesus ends this section by predicting that false disciples will be revealed. They will be known. They cannot hide their false, unloving, and selfish hearts forever. Such a prediction is sad when it comes true. We take no joy in witnessing the exposure and fall of false-hearted church members. But when unveiling comes, Christians must not hesitate to remove such people from positions of authority and influence.

What Do You Think?

Under what circumstances would it be a good idea for Christians to hold one another accountable for the good fruit they are not producing, but should be, for the kingdom?

Digging Deeper

How could such a program be implemented without it becoming controlling in a cult-like sense?

B. Wonders of False Workers (vv. 21-23)

21. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

The fruit Jesus desires is to see disciples doing *the will of Jesus' Father who is in heaven*. This tests the sincerity or dishonesty of one's discipleship to Christ. No one can be a follower of Jesus if he or she

constantly resists yielding to the will of God. The affirmation *Lord, Lord* does not take the place of actions ([Hosea 8:2, 3](#); [Matthew 25:11, 12](#); [John 13:13, 14](#); contrast [1 Corinthians 12:3](#)).

Earlier in his sermon, Jesus said that a righteousness that exceeds that of the teachers of the law and Pharisees is required to *enter the kingdom of heaven* ([Matthew 5:20](#)). Who will be allowed to enter the kingdom? This is promised to “the poor in spirit” ([5:3](#)) and to those who suffer persecution for their loyalty to Jesus ([5:10](#)). True members of the kingdom recognize their spiritual dependency on the Lord. They endure suffering for following Jesus and align their hearts and their actions to the will of God ([Romans 2:13](#); [James 1:22](#); [1 John 3:18](#)). These are proper and rightful kingdom members ([Matthew 12:50](#)).

22, 23. “Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ ”

Jesus finishes with a dramatic flourish. Imagine people who have dynamically spoken for the Lord in public (*prophesy*; see [1 Corinthians 13:2](#)), who have performed exorcisms (*drive out demons*; see [Luke 10:20](#); [Acts 19:13](#)), and

have performed *many miracles*. This three-part list contains some of the most dramatic displays of Christian work we can imagine. But God is well aware that these people are *evildoers*. Jesus’ verdict is that he *never knew* them as his disciples because they never knew him (see [Psalm 6:8](#); [Matthew 25:12](#); [Luke 13:25–27](#)). There is no faith relationship. Even fantastic works can cover a selfish and unrepentant heart for only so long.

Conclusion

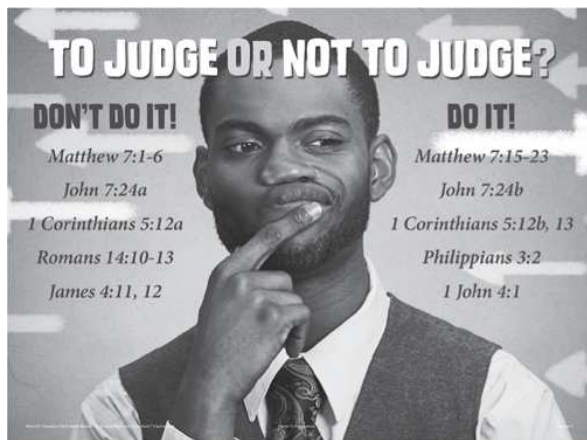
A. Confessions of a Reformed Legalist

Churches of my era led many to believe that Christians were morally superior people because we kept the rules. Obedience was compelled by fear of ostracism. Those whose lives did not match traditional standards of the church were shamed, shunned, or expelled.

This was the mind-set I and many others of my generation grew up with. The result was a tendency to lump together the outright hypocrites (who should have known better) with the spiritually immature who stumbled back into sin.

I abandoned my sense of moral superiority as I grew older. I still acknowledged the fact that there were people in my church who hypocritically hid their

private sins. Some of these folks were the quickest to censor and condemn anyone they believed to be breaking the rules. Their legalistic orientation caused them to be more concerned with controlling the behavior of others rather than repenting of their own secret sins. But I distinguish them from fellow believers who stumble back into sin but then return to the Lord with repentance and humbled hearts.



Visual for Lesson 9. Use this visual as a basis for a learning activity: form learners into two debating teams, one to take each position.

Rather than jump to judgement, I am determined look to the fruit of repentance. Do I see the fruit of the Spirit in spite of their past failings? Paul says there is no law against this fruit ([Galatians 5:22, 23](#)). Make no mistake: I still care about godly behavior. I care deeply about injustice. I seek to live to please my Lord. But I also know I will never live without any sin on this earth. I also real-

ize that others are in the same condition.

I regret having lived as a legalist, and I now attempt to live in such a way that my own fruit is founded on “a broken and contrite heart” ([Psalm 51:17](#)) in keeping with repentance ([Matthew 3:8](#)). Such a heart is yielded fully to God. Most assuredly, [Philippians 3:13, 14](#) applies!

B. Prayer

Holy God, although we love your laws, help us not to fall into the trap of thinking that we are saved by those laws. Forgive us when we have treated rules as more important than people. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Actions reveal the content of the heart.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible](#)
Student

Into the Lesson

Before class, download two or three commercials advertising free credit-score reports from a video-sharing website. Begin class by playing the commercials for your group. *Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “How Do You Rate?” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download, to be completed as indicated by interaction with fellow class members.

After either activity, discuss the idea of ratings with these questions: 1-What is the value of having rating systems? 2-What are some rating systems to which you pay a great deal of attention? 3-In what contexts have you been evaluated by some sort of rating scale? 4-What makes some rating systems more valid than others?

Lead into Bible study by saying, “Rating a movie, evaluating job performance, and assessing the quality of goods are familiar to us. But how do we go about judging the godliness of another person? Jesus has invaluable words of caution on just this question.”

Into the Word

Divide students into three groups. Give each group one of the following objects and Scripture assignments: *Judgment Group* ([Matthew 7:1-6](#)): a pocket mirror; *Fruit Group* ([Matthew 7:15-20](#)): a piece of fresh fruit; *Recommendation Group* ([Matthew 7:21-23](#)): a sample letter of reference. Ask groups to read their Scripture passages and discuss how their objects relate to the text.

Expected responses in the whole-class discussion should be similar to these: *Judgment Group*—Before making judgments about others, look in the mirror. It is hard to be taken seriously if you offer advice that you obviously do not follow yourself! Once we do that, we can make clear, helpful judgments, not just condemning remarks. *Fruit Group*—By close examination of an apple, a grape, or melon, one can determine its nature as healthy or unhealthy fruit. The same is true with people. By examining what they value, how they behave, the reputations they have, and the relationships they form, the “fruit inspector” can reach a valid conclusion regarding someone’s suitability as a church leader or teacher. *Recommendation Group*—Job applicants are known to produce glowing letters of recommendations. But only evaluations from those having comprehensive knowledge of a person can be trusted. In evalu-

ating someone's character, care must be taken in discerning the validity of every report. Regarding those who "apply" for eternal life in the kingdom of Heaven, God's evaluation is the one that ultimately matters.

Alternative. Form learners into study pairs or groups of three. Distribute copies of the "True or False?" activity from the reproducible page to be completed as indicated, then discuss.

After either activity, lead into the Into Life segment by saying, "Jesus does not command that we say nothing when someone we know is on the wrong path. Rather, he counsels us not to offer blanket condemnation. Instead, we first evaluate our own behavior so we can offer helpful correction without hypocrisy. We need to respond to evil wisely. Let's see how that might look."

Into Life

Ask the class to name common sinful behaviors; jot their responses on the board. Then ask a volunteer to select an item from the list and offer one example each of blind acceptance, blanket condemnation, and godly counsel. *Example:* for abortion, blind acceptance might be to support unthinkingly the "right to choose" argument; blanket condemnation might be to stand outside an abortion clinics merely to yell at those trying

to enter; godly counsel could be to refer those with unplanned pregnancies to a local crisis pregnancy center (which you support) for counseling.