

Conceptual frames, rhetorical strategy and divine reciprocity in Matthew 7:1–5



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This article conducted a comprehensive rhetorical, parabolic, and conceptual frame analysis of the parable in Matthew 7:1–5. It sought to clarify its ethical vision within Matthew's narrative and socio-historical context. The parable was analysed by using Akpan and Viljoen's parable methodology, as well as Kazen and Roitto's *measure*, *accounting*, and *size* conceptual frames to uncover Matthew 7:1–5's cognitive foundations of moral judgement. The analysis undertaken situated Matthew 7:3–4 within the Sermon on the Mount's rhetorical argument and indicated that it can be understood as a parable emphasising ethical self-examination. Matthew's ethics challenge the dominant *size* frame, advocating universal righteousness that subverted the honour-shame hierarchies. The parable also reflects the *measure* and *accounting* frames that consistently demonstrate God's reciprocal justice throughout the Gospel of Matthew. The parable is thus a directive for fostering healthy inter-community relationships based on Jesus's counter-cultural emphasis on forgiveness, generosity, and self-criticism which fundamentally reconfigured ancient Mediterranean power dynamics.

Contribution: This research provided an original, comprehensive rhetorical, and cognitive frame analysis of Matthew 7:1–5. In addressing this scholarly gap, it deepened our understanding of Matthew's systematic use of *measure*, *accounting*, and *size* frames, clarifying Jesus's transformative ethical vision, promoting self-reflection and non-hierarchical relationships.

Keywords: Matthew 7:1–5; Sermon on the Mount; Parable of the hypocrite with a beam in his eye; interpersonal judgement; cognitive frames.

Introduction

Francois Viljoen has, in numerous studies, utilised a comprehensive approach to interpret the Sermon on the Mount as the literary and theological centrepiece of Matthew's Gospel. Viljoen (2013:2) considers the Sermon on the Mount as one of Matthew's five foundational discourses, functioning as the 'Constitution of the Kingdom of Heaven' that shapes Matthew's Jewish-Christian community identity through its central theme of δικαιοσύνη [righteousness]. According to Viljoen's analysis (2018:55, 71, 136, 179–180, 326, 350) in his monograph, *The Torah in Matthew*, Matthew depicts Jesus as the 'new Moses' who delivers his authoritative Torah interpretation to persuade a synagogue-estranged community to live according to a superior righteousness that surpasses that of the Jewish scribes and Pharisees. Viljoen (along with Aniedi M. Akpan) has also developed a sophisticated framework for understanding parables, treating them as complex rhetorical and metaphorical devices rather than simple illustrations (Akpan & Viljoen 2021:1–8). Viljoen and Akpan conceptualise parables as fictional narratives that metaphorically bridge everyday experiences with religious and ethical teachings, creating what he calls a 'surplus of meaning' that invites interpretation while being guided by contextual constraints.

Akpan and Viljoen's (2021:9) interpretive methodology (2021:9) rests on six key principles. They emphasise 'correlating parable interpretations with Jesus's broader non-parabolic teachings' to avoid speculative readings and situating each parable within its Gospel context to serve the specific 'evangelist's theological purposes'. Their approach furthermore demands a comprehensive analysis of 'narrative structure and rhetorical elements', a strict focus on textually explicit information without foreign additions, and a careful attention to 'first-century Jewish-Palestinian social contexts' and 'conventional metaphors'. Finally, they advocate for a measured engagement with allegorical elements, rejecting wholesale allegorisation while recognising genuinely intended allegorical features where the evangelist clearly signals transferred meanings.

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This chapter will firstly build on the work of Viljoen on the Sermon on the Mount and the interpretation of parables by exploring the sophisticated rhetorical strategies employed in the Matthean Jesus's teaching on judgement in Matthew 7:1–5. Matthew 7:2–3 that forms part of the rhetorical unit of Matthew 7:1–5 meets Zimmermann's definition (2009) of a parable.¹ According to Zimmermann's definition, Matthew 7:3–4 qualifies as a parable because it fulfils all six of his essential criteria cohesive. The passage presents a short, fictional narrative about someone attempting to remove a speck from another person's eye, drawing from the known reality of everyday experiences with eye irritants. However, the extreme contrast between the speck (κάρφος) and the massive log (δοκός) functions as a clear transfer signal, indicating that its meaning transcends the literal level – the absurd image of someone with a log protruding from their eye trying to help someone with a speck immediately signals metaphorical intent. This vivid, almost comical imagery creates an appeal structure that challenges readers to look beyond the surface narrative, while the surrounding context of Matthew 7:1–5 about judgement and the broader framework of the Sermon on the Mount, guides the metaphoric transfer towards understanding the passage as teaching about hypocrisy and self-examination, rather than literal ophthalmology.

Matthew 7:1–5 was chosen as the focus text for this article because, although conducive to analysis through the method proposed by Viljoen (2018), Kazen and Roitto (2024), it is not analysed in their respective monographs. The chosen pericope will be interpreted within the narrative and theological framework of Matthew's Gospel with particular attention given to its argumentative structure and its immediate literary context (5:3–7:27; Akpan & Viljoen 2021:4). The ethical framework underlying the Matthean Jesus's teaching on judging others will also be considered within its socio-historical context and correlated with his non-parabolic teaching on interpersonal relations. The stock metaphors and symbols of the parable will also be considered (Akpan & Viljoen 2021:6). While the allegorising of the parable in Matthew 7:2–3 will be resisted, the cognitive frames underlying it will be studied. In this regard, the analysis of Matthew 7:1–5 will use the insights of the recent study of Thomas Kazen and Rikard Roitto, 'Revenge, Compensation and Forgiveness in the Ancient World', which examines 'moral repair' strategies across Jewish, Christian, Greek, and Roman traditions, using interdisciplinary cognitive science methodologies. One method used by Kazen and Roitto that focuses on the underlying cognitive frames shaping ancient morality will be employed to understand the ethics evident in Matthew 7:1–5. The method focuses on identifying the shared human biological underpinnings that create similar moral linguistic frames across cultures, while acknowledging cultural variations (Kazen & Roitto 2024:22, 99). This analysis will enable us to situate the ethics of judgement of the Matthean Jesus within its socio-historical context.

1. Zimmermann (2009:170) defines a parable as a short narrative (1) fictional (2) text, that is related in the narrative world to the known reality (3), but by way of implicit or explicit transfer signals, makes it understood that the meaning of the narration must be differentiated from the literal words of the text (4). In its appeal structure (5), it challenges the reader to carry out a metaphorical transfer of meaning that is steered by co-text and context information (6).

The literary context of Matthew 7:1–5

As argued in a previous study (Nel 2015:2–4), the Gospel of Matthew broadly follows the threefold *τύξις* of an ancient Greek βίος. It begins with a prologue [προοίμιον] that gives an overview of the genealogy, birth, and beginning of Jesus's ministry (Mt 1:1–2:23). This is followed by a long narration [διήγησις] of the major events in his ministry (Mt 3:1–25:46) and an epilogue [ἐπίλογος] that describes his honourable death (26:1–28:20; Burridge 1997:521). The διήγησις of the Gospel of Matthew differs from that of most Greco-Roman βίοι in the way it interweaves the teaching of Jesus, that are grouped in five extended discourses, with an extended narrative of his deeds (cf. Mt 4:17–11:1; 11:2–13:52; 13:53–16:20; 16:21–19:2; 19:3–25:46). Matthew 7:1–5 is part of the first of these extended discourses – the Sermon on the Mount (5:3–7:27).

Matthew structured the Sermon on the Mount as a deliberative rhetorical argument that endeavours to persuade its readers to specific acts of obedience, with a view to the immediate future (Combrink 1988:182; Kennedy 1984:45–46). Despite a consensus on its rhetorical nature, there is no agreement regarding the precise structure of the argumentative texture of the Sermon on the Mount (Betz 1995:50–58; Kennedy 1984:48–49; Mack 1990:82–85). While Kennedy (1984:48–49), Mack (1990:82–85), Combrink (1992:16) and Betz (1995:50–58) agree that Matthew 5:3–16 is the *exordium* of the Sermon on the Mount, and that 5:17–20 as *propositio* sets the basic propositions of the main argument (which begins in 5:21), there is no further consensus regarding the rhetorical structure of the Sermon on the Mount. Particularly, the determination of where the *probatio* ends and transitions to the *peroratio*, is unclear. Kennedy (1984:49), for example, takes Matthew 7:21–27 as the *epilogue*; Mack (1990:84–85) 6:25 to 7:27 as a series of negative and positive admonitions (6:25–7:14) and warnings (7:15–27) that end with a narrative conclusion (7:28–29); Combrink (1992:16) 7:13–27 as *peroratio*; and Betz (1995:58–59) 7:24–27 as *probatio*. In this article, 7:12 is taken as the conclusion of the *probatio*, following Guelich (1982:36–40), Lambrecht (1985:28), Allison (1987:437–438), Combrink (1992:16), Hagner (1993:84) and Betz (1995:57). The reason for this choice is that Matthew 5:17–20, together with 7:12, provide the hermeneutical keys for the correct interpretation of the law² (Betz 1995:62), while the correspondence between 5:17 and 7:12 forms an *inclusio* that binds the *propositio* and the *probatio* into a larger rhetorical unit (Betz 2008:62; Carter 1994:85; Hagner 1993:84). The structure outlined in Box 1, proposed by Thom (2009:315–316) and followed by Viljoen (2018:112), seems to be the most acceptable for the argumentative texture of the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 7:1–5 forms part of the *probatio* and its argumentative structure and therefore needs to be analysed in greater detail to understand the parable of the hypocrite with a beam in his eye within its particular Gospel context (Akpan & Viljoen 2021:3).

2. Jesus's relationship to the Torah constitutes a central motif in Matthew in that Jesus is depicted as the final and supreme Torah expositor. This Torah relationship receives specific treatment in the Sermon on the Mount, particularly in Matthew 5:17–48 (Viljoen 2018:41).

BOX 1: Proposed structure for the argumentative texture of the Sermon on the Mount.

A. Rhetorical context of the Sermon on the Mount (4:23–5:2)
B. Exordium (Introduction) (5:3–16)
1. The basis of a life in righteousness (5:3–12) 2. Commission to the disciples (5:13–16)
C. Propositio (Statement of the theme) (5:17–20)
1. Jesus came to fulfil the law (5:17–19) 2. The disciples' righteousness must be more abundant than that of the scribes and the Pharisees (5:20)
D. Probatio (Argument): (5:21–7:12)
1. Six examples (<i>antitheses</i>) of more abundant righteousness than the law's observance of the scribes and Pharisees (5:21–48) 2. Three examples of more abundant righteousness as religious acts (6:1–18) 3. Seven examples of more abundant righteousness in everyday life (6:19–7:12)
E. Peroration Conclusion) (7:13–27)
1. Warning about the two ways (7:13–14) 2. Warning about false prophets (7:15–20) 3. Admonition about hearing and doing (7:21–23) 4. Parable of the two foundations (7:24–27)
F. Narrative conclusion and transition (7:28–8:1)

Source: Thom, J.C., 2009, 'Justice in the Sermon on the Mount: An Aristotelian reading', *Novum Testamentum* 51(4), 314–338. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853609X432792>; and Viljoen, F.P., 2018, *The Torah in Matthew*, Theology in Africa no. 9, LIT Verlag, Zürich

The argumentative structure of the probatio (Mt 5:21–7:12)

The *probatio* was regarded by ancient rhetoricians as the most important part of a speech (or complete argument), as it contains the proofs for the proposition set out in its *propositio* (Van Zijl 1991:166). In the *probatio* (5:21–7:12), Matthew, in support of his two basic propositions (5:17–20), gives three sets of examples of the more abundant righteousness³ that God requires.⁴ That all three sets contain sections about reconciliation or forgiveness, important aspects of managing interpersonal relations, indicates that Matthew sees this as being important in all areas of life (religious, juridical, and everyday social interactions). While Matthew's Gospel, as is the case with the other Gospels, was intended for a wide circulation, its content is shaped by the issues faced by the Matthean community. The maintenance and restoration of interpersonal relationships was clearly an ongoing issue faced by it. The more abundant righteousness set out in the *probatio* also reveals something of the complex history of Jewish-Christian relations in the 1st century, which often strained relationships within the Matthean community and with those with whom it interacted (Viljoen 2006:243).

Matthew 5:21–48 contains six examples of the more abundant righteousness than the law observance, demanded by the Scribes and Pharisees, expected by Jesus (France 1985:117; Kennedy 1984:55). Firstly, according to Viljoen (2018:7), all these examples present the Matthean Jesus's halakhic arguments concerning Torah interpretation, signifying his alternative understanding of the Law. Secondly, (6:1–18) introduced by 6:1 (Przybylski 1980:88), which repeats the thesis of 5:20, contains three examples of more abundant

3.The noun *δικαιοσύνη* represents a central Matthean term describing required behaviour for Jesus's followers. While concentrated significantly in the Sermon on the Mount, the term extends beyond this discourse to characterise the conduct of both Jesus and John the Baptist (Viljoen 2018:7).

4.The rhetorical connection between 5:3–12 and 5:13–16, as well as 7:7–11 and 7:12, emphasises the reality that the practice of more abundant righteousness is only possible for those who live in total dependence on God (Combrink 1992:19).

righteousness in religious acts (charity, prayer and fasting). Thirdly, the last set (6:19–7:12) contains various examples of more abundant righteousness in everyday life (Betz 1995:62; Combrink 1992:16; Kennedy 1984:55).

Unlike in Matthew 6:19–34, the argumentative structure of Matthew 7:1–12 remains elusive. Scholars typically label this section as containing *exhortations* or addressing *social or practical issues*, reflecting the difficulty in identifying textual unity (Baasland 2015:418–419). Rather than having a coherent structure, it is a loose collection of originally independent sayings (7:1–2, 3–5, 6, 7–8, 9–11, 12) from diverse sources. The prevailing scholarly consensus divides the passage into discrete units lacking thematic coherence. There are units on judging (7:1–5), holiness (7:6), asking and giving (7:7–11), and the Golden Rule (7:12). Baasland (2015:419) suggests that the unifying theme in 7:1–11 is reciprocity and that 7:12 concludes the section and the *probatio* by stating their overriding principle with the so-called 'golden rule' which is a summary of Matthew 22:40. For Baasland (2015:421) 7:1–11 comprises two thematic units. One on judging or measuring and seeing (7:1–5) and a second on giving and asking (7:6–11). The theme of reciprocity unites both units in 7:1–12. The first unit operates through the principle of *lex talionis* and measuring (judging); the second through gifts – giving and receiving. Both themes are important in honour-and-shame societies in which patron and client relationships play an important role.

Abundant righteousness in everyday life (Mt 6:19–7:12)

The last set of guidelines for a life of abundant righteousness (6:19–7:12) contains various examples thereof in everyday life (Betz 1995:62; Combrink 1992:16; Kennedy 1984:55). The set of guidelines can be divided into seven units (6:19–21, 22–23, 24, 25–34, 7:1–6, 7–11 and 12) in which different aspects of the believer's life are addressed. The *probatio* is concluded in 7:12. In regard to the *probatio*, the focus here, in line with the aim of this article, will be on 7:1–5 as a rhetorical unit. The rhetorical unit deals with the condemnation of others, as well as in terms of the non-parabolic biblical material⁵ in Matthew, it corresponds largely with the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer (6:12; Guelich 1982:349; Hagner 1993:168). It also shows a general correspondence with 5:7, 9, 22, 24; 6:12, 14–15; 7:12 (Betz 1995:491; Carson 1994:184; Guelich 1982:349; Hagner 1993:168) and Matthew 18:23–35 [not included in heading] (Gundry 1982:121; Hendrickx 1984:151; Luz 1989:390). The principle of retributive justice that underlies various key passages about reconciliation and forgiveness in the Sermon on the Mount, also underlies the pericope (Van Zijl 1991:193).

The rhetorical structure of Matthew 7:1–5

To undertake a full-breadth analysis of the parable in 7:3–4, in line with the method for interpreting parables suggested by Akpan and Viljoen (2021:3, 5), a detailed analysis of the

5.To correctly interpret parables, exegetes need to check for balance between their interpretation and the general teaching of Jesus reported by the evangelists, or even other teaching sections of the New Testament (Akpan & Viljoen 2021:3).

rhetorical structure of verses 1–5 (Box 2) as a rhetorical unit and its individual parts, needs to be undertaken.⁶

The first two verses of the rhetorical unit are bound together by the repetition of *judge* [κρίνω] and its conjugations) and the accumulation of references ‘to measure’ [μετρέω] and ‘measure’ (μέτρον). The subsequent three verses are joined together by the continuous reference to brother [ἀδελφός], eye [ὄφθαλμός], beam [δοκός], remove [ἐκβάλλω] and speck [κάρφος]. The beginning, middle and end of the rhetorical unit correspond respectively with verses 1 to 2, 3 to 4 and 5.

The argumentative texture of Matthew 7:1–5

Matthew 7:1–5 as a rhetorical unit is introduced by a thesis in the form of a proverb (Betz 1995:489; Guelich 1982:349) which is followed by the theological grounds for it, formulated as a synonymous parallelism in verse 2 (Davies & Allison 1988:670; Guelich 1982:349; Turner 2008:205). The thesis of verse 1 is supported by an argument for the implausibility of acting contrary to it through the hyperbolic metaphor of the beam in the eye of the one who wants to remove a speck from his brother’s eye (cf. Rhet. 2.23.21). The argumentative texture of the rhetorical unit is that of a wisdom discourse, as it focuses on the social relationships between people, and their influence on their relationship with God (Robbins 2002:5–7).

Matthew 7:1–2

The verb κρίνω in verses 1 to 2 has the meaning of *condemn* rather than merely *judge* (Patte 1987:96; Van Zijl 1991:194). It does not prohibit any evaluation of the conduct and teachings of others (Turner 2008:205). It instead forbids judgementalism and the aggressive public challenge of another’s honour (Neyrey 1998:224). While judging typically invokes fixed norms (laws, rules, customs), measuring is more open-ended despite potential objective standards. It can refer to everyday activities like measuring out commodities like grain in markets (France 2007:275; Nolland 2005:318–319). *Measure* was, however, often used metaphorically for evaluating the conduct of others (Baasland 2015:423). In both concrete and metaphorical uses, the underlying principle is that the standard used for measuring must be used consistently and

BOX 2: The rhetorical structure of Matthew 7:1–5.

<p>Thesis (Proverb) ¹Μὴ κρίνετε, ἵνα μὴ κριθῆτε.</p> <p>Reason (synonymous parallelism) ²ὣν γὰρ κρίματι κρίνετε κριθήσεσθε, καὶ ἐν ᾧ μέτρον μετρεῖτε ³μετρηθήσεται ὑμῖν.</p> <p>Example (parable) ³τί δὲ βλέπεις τὸ κάρφος τὸ ἐν τῷ ὀφθαλμῷ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ σου, τὴν δὲ ἐν τῷ σῷ ὀφθαλμῷ δοκὸν οὐ κατανοεῖς; ⁴ ἢ πῶς ἔρεις τῷ ἀδελφῷ σου ἄφες ἐκβάλλω τὸ κάρφος ⁵ἐκ τοῦ ὀφθαλμοῦ σου, καὶ ἰδοὺ ἡ δοκὸς ἐν τῷ ὀφθαλμῷ σου;</p> <p>Final admonition ⁵ ὑποκριτὰ, ἐκβαλε πρῶτον ⁶ἐκ τοῦ ὀφθαλμοῦ σου τὴν δοκόν², καὶ τότε διαβλέψεις ἐκβαλεῖν τὸ κάρφος ἐκ τοῦ ὀφθαλμοῦ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ σου (cf. Betz 1995:56, 489).</p>

Source: Betz, H.D., 1995, *The Sermon on the mount: A commentary on the Sermon on the mount, including the Sermon on the plain (Matthew 5:3–7:27 and Luke 6:20–49)*, Hermeneia, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN

⁶According to Akpan and Viljoen (2021:5), close attention must be given to a parable’s structure and thought development, as well as to features of symmetry or parallelism between components.

that there should be no double standards when measuring others or items (France 2007:275). In daily life, κρίνω has the negative connotations of criticising and condemning others. This condemnation is toxic for relationships, as it establishes the superiority of those who judge over those whom they judge. Judging in this sense evokes power dynamics. Verse 1 addresses this aspect of judgement and the lack of reciprocity in interpersonal relations, rather than verdicts in legal affairs needed for a just society (Baasland 2015:430; France 2007:274).

Verse 2 states that how others are judged will be determinative of how God’s eschatological judgement will occur (Luz 1989:416; Nolland 2005:318; Patte 1987:85; Turner 2008:204). While the future passives (κριθήσεσθε and μετρηθήσεται) in verse 2 can denote human judgement in this context, they should be understood as examples of *passivum divinum*: God will reciprocate both judgement and measurement (Baasland 2015:428; France 2007:274). The μὴ κρίνετε prohibition implies humans acting like God. Humans created in God’s image lack the authority to judge fellow image-bearers (Baasland 2015:431). The warning that those who judge others will also be judged, reveals the identical principle underlying Matthew 6:14–15 and 18:32–35, namely retributive justice. It is also related to the commands of Jesus that the disciples should seek reconciliation (5:21–26), love their enemies (5:43–48) and forgive those who transgress against them (6:12, 14–15; 18: 21–22) and the Golden rule (7:12; Turner 2008:205). Just as God will forgive those who forgive others, he will also condemn those who condemn (France 1985:142–143; Guelich 1982:350, 374). The prohibition on judgements that harm interpersonal relationships, thus *correlates with Jesus’s broader non-parabolic teachings* and Matthew’s *specific theological purposes*.

Matthew 7:2b provides a second, parallel basis for the apodictic command in verse 1, namely that God will measure people in the same way as they measure others (Betz 1995: 490–491; Davies & Allison 1988:670; Guelich 1982:351, 374). The measuring simile’s *socio-historical background* extends beyond carpentry contexts – it pervaded everyday commerce and life. The term, μέτρον, appears frequently in papyri and Graeco-Roman literature, denoting a balance or yardstick for exchange without specifying the measurement type. ‘With the measure you use, it will be measured to you’, mirrors the socio-historical reality of social exchanges in contexts like the villages frequented by the Matthean Jesus. It assumes the reciprocal exchange of goods, gifts, and compliments that was crucial in honour-shame societies in which self-measuring and neighbour evaluation occurred simultaneously. Matthew 7:2 reflects this general social code (Baasland 2015:425). The Matthean Jesus, however, goes further than this social code by warning that the act of judging others establishes criteria by which the one who judges will ultimately be judged by God (Nolland 2005:319). The implication of this is that those who judge others should be aware of their own adherence to the standards or criteria they use to judge others.

Matthew 7:3–4

Matthew 7:3–4 contains a parable comprised of a person who attempts to remove a speck (κάρφος) from their brother’s eye

while having a massive log (δοκός) protruding from their own eye. As indicated by Akpan and Viljoen (2021:3), as is often the case with parables in the New Testament, its parabolic subject aligns with the *non-parabolic material attributed to Jesus*. The correct interpretation of the brief parable in 7:3–4, therefore, requires balancing its parabolic meaning with Jesus's general teaching in Matthew.

The parable in 7:3–4 contains two hyperbolic metaphors, formulated as rhetorical questions, which serve as examples of the apodictic prohibition of verse 1 (cf. Betz 1995:489; Davies & Allison 1988:670; Guelich 1982:349, 351 and 375; Kennedy 1984:61). The questions uniquely address the audience directly in the Sermon on the Mount (Baasland 2015:238). The warning is clear: 'you' (σύ, emphasised six times, identified as ὑποκριτά) should dialogue with *brother* (ἀδελφός, three times). The function of the hyperbolic formulation is to emphasise the main point of the parable (Baasland 2015:437), namely before others are judged in a self-righteous manner, self-examination must first be done (Betz 1995:492; Carson 1984:184; Hagner 1993:169). The imagery is deliberately ridiculous – no one can have a log or beam stuck in their eye (France 2007:275). Like all parables of Jesus, the parable of the splinter and the beam⁷ is rooted in the socio-historical reality of everyday life (Akpan & Viljoen 2021:6).⁸ Its imagery would therefore have been familiar to all who worked with timber (Baasland 2015:440).

Matthew 7:3–exemplifies the metaphorical nature of parables through its clear demonstration of transferred meaning (μεταφέρειν = transfer) rather than literal significance. It highlights the transactional relationship between two distinct domains of understanding that characterises parabolic discourse (Akpan & Viljoen 2021:2; Zimmermann 2009:172). In this passage, the 'image providing' domain [*bildspendender Bereich*] draws from the familiar sphere of daily life and experience – specifically, the common occurrence of getting debris in one's eye and the practical challenge of removing it. The parable's meaning then emerges through its transfer to the 'image receiving' domain [*bildempfangender Bereich*], which operates within the religious and ethical sphere of moral judgement and self-examination (Zimmermann 2014:7). The absurd contrast between the speck [κάρφος] and the massive log [δοκός] signals that the parable's significance lies not in its literal ophthalmological content but in its metaphorical commentary on human hypocrisy and the tendency to judge others' minor faults while remaining blind to one's own major shortcomings. This transference from the mundane reality of eye irritants to the profound ethical principle of self-awareness before criticism, illustrates how biblical parables characteristically bridge everyday experience with spiritual

7. κάρφος indicates any small, insignificant particle, for example a splinter or sawdust (Davies & Allison 1988:671; Morris 1992:166). δοκός means: beam, log, timber, plank, or roof beam.

8. Petronius (d. 66 CE) employs nearly identical imagery to Matthew 7:3ff., contrasting those who see small things (ricinus) in others while overlooking larger ones (pediculus) in themselves: 'in alio pediculum vides, in te ricinum non vides, tibi soli ridiculi videntur' ['You see a louse in another person, but you don't see a tick in yourself; do we seem ridiculous to you alone?'] (Satyricon 57:7–8; Baasland 2015:436).

and moral truth through metaphorical transaction between these two domains.

It is not necessary to interpret the parable in Matthew 7:3–4 as an allegory. According to Akpan and Viljoen (2021:8), in an allegory, every detail tends to have significance and is needed to achieve complete interpretation. Conversely, details in a parable are not all equally significant in meaning. Some of the details serve only to 'garnish' and 'colour' the story and nothing more. Therefore, any attempt to assign meaning to all details of a parable ends up allegorising it. The power of the parable in Matthew 7:3–4 thus lies not in finding symbolic meaning for every element – such as the specific nature of the speck [κάρφος] or the exact characteristics of the log [δοκός] – but rather in grasping its central point about hypocrisy and self-examination. The vivid imagery of these contrasting objects serves primarily to create a memorable and striking illustration that highlights the absurdity of judging others while being blind to one's own greater faults.⁹ Attempting to allegorise every detail would obscure rather than illuminate the parable's essential message (Akpan & Viljoen 2021:8).

Matthew 7:5

In 7:5, the disciples are sharply addressed as *hypocrites* [ὑποκριτής]. To judge others as if they themselves are not sinners makes the disciples hypocrites. This is the only instance in Matthew where this term is used for the disciples of Jesus (France 2007:276). The admonition calls on the disciples to first correct their own shortcomings before they point out to others their lesser shortcomings (Guelich 1982:351–353; Hagner 1993:169–170). To condemn each other is not to act with grace and forgiveness (Van Zijl 1991:195). In a humble awareness of their own shortcomings and the necessity of God's forgiveness, they should rather help others in love (Guelich 1982:375–376). Those who have experienced God's grace and forgiveness must reflect it in their dealings with others.

The cognitive frame underlying Matthew 7:1–5

To situate the ethics of judgement of the Matthean Jesus in Matthew 7:1–5 within its socio-historical context, and within his broader non-parabolic teachings in Matthew, aspects of Kazen and Roitto's work, *Revenge, compensation, and forgiveness in the ancient world* (2024) will be applied to the rhetorical unit. Although they do not themselves explicitly discuss Matthew 7:1–5, their comprehensive framework for analysing interpersonal infringement and moral repair in antiquity provides several conceptual frames that are useful for understanding judgement in interpersonal relationships.¹⁰

9. The tendency to observe others' faults while overlooking one's own appears throughout Hellenistic literature, echoing themes like 'physician heal yourself' and Hillel's maxim: 'Don't judge before you are in his position' (m. 'Abot 2,4). This discrepancy between harsh verdicts on others and needed self-reflection remains central to Stoic philosophy. Similar themes occur in Old Testament narratives (Nathan's fable to David, 1 Sm 12:1–5) and Jewish wisdom (Sir 18:20: 'Before judgement comes, examine yourself ...') (Baasland 2015:435–436).

10. Other possible approaches used by Kazen and Roitto that could be useful for understanding Matthew 7:1–5, are moral foundation theory, game theory, and the valuable relationships hypothesis. Moral Foundations Theory, posits universal moral intuitions. The fairness or cheating foundation is particularly relevant, as the

Conceptual frames as a tool

A *conceptual frame*, often used synonymously with *cognitive frame*, functions as a methodological tool employed to analyse the understanding of abstract concepts through metaphorical expressions derived from concrete, embodied, and social experiences. This theoretical approach, significantly influenced by George Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor theory posits that human thought is profoundly embodied and emotionally grounded, with emotions being an intrinsic part of the cognitive process (Kazen & Roitto 2024:32–33). These frames enable us to comprehend how humans conceptualise interpersonal relations, their associated feelings, and their methods of conflict resolution, connecting these to biological and cultural conditions that enable survival. Conceptual frames provide us with lenses for understanding moral judgement in interpersonal relations (Kazen & Roitto 2024:33, 40–44) and enable us to understand how the central metaphor of 'measure' and the vivid imagery of 'speck and log' in Matthew 7:3–4, taken from everyday experiences, can be used to understand the passage's cognitive underpinnings.

Cognitive frames allow us to compare the ethics of a particular text, like the Gospel of Matthew, with those of others, as the moral imagination is based fundamentally rooted in the embodied human experience (Kazen & Roitto 2024:32–33). While diverse cultures may cultivate distinct moral imaginations, certain patterns exhibit universality due to shared embodied experiences and innate predispositions, such as the inherent appreciation for fairness (Kazen & Roitto 2024:59). Emotions, including contempt, anger, disgust, shame, embarrassment, guilt, pride, empathy, awe, elevation, and gratitude, are deeply involved in moral appraisal, thereby influencing behaviour and values (Kazen & Roitto 2024:31). Critically, all these frames are 'profoundly embodied and emotionally grounded', arising from evolutionary processes that historically contributed to fitness and survival.

Conceptual frames for interpersonal judgement

While numerous conceptual frames exist for Interpersonal Judgement, the following are important for the analysis of interpersonal moral judgement in antiquity in general and Matthew 7:1–5 in particular. The *measure* frame is foundational to discourse concerning justice, distribution, status, and fairness and is common in Jewish, ancient West Asian, Greek, and Roman legislation and thinking alike (Kazen & Roitto 2024:58–72). It originates from experiences related to resource

(footnote 10 continues ...)

passage directly addresses proportional justice and the unfairness of hypocritical judgement (Kazen & Roitto 2024:36–37). Game Theory which studies strategies of cooperation and retaliation (Kazen & Roitto 2024:22–28), applies to the dynamic implied in Matthew 7:1–2. The principle that 'the measure you give will be the measure you get' highlights reciprocal behaviour: if one refrains from judging others harshly (a cooperative strategy), they can expect less harsh judgement in return (reciprocal cooperation), particularly in the context of divine judgement. Valuable Relationships Hypothesis: This hypothesis suggests that individuals may forgo revenge or harsh responses to preserve valuable relationships (Kazen & Roitto 2024:25). The admonition to remove one's own flaws before addressing those of a *neighbour* (Mt 7:3–5) can be seen as a strategy to maintain or repair the interpersonal relationship, rather than immediately confrontational judgement that could damage it.

sharing and equitable distribution, and is the dominant frame in nearly all legal discussions. Concepts such as compensation and revenge are frequently conceptualised as balancing scales. For instance, the principle of *talion* [an eye for an eye] expresses a principle of balance that was often converted into monetary or other resources, aiming to restore a disturbed equilibrium for renewed social interaction. The *SIZE* frame, on the other hand, is inherently hierarchical, linked to body size and social status, and is crucial for comprehending issues of honour and shame (Kazen & Roitto 2024:72–81). Infringements on personal integrity and honour, such as bodily violence or public shaming, are understood through this frame. It shapes social hierarchies, status, and honour that exert a pervasive and decisive influence on defining relationships and appraising infringements, frequently overshadowing more egalitarian values.

The two frames of *measure* and *size* frequently interact with each other (Kazen & Roitto 2024:72). For example, Aristotle's concept of distributive justice, which assigns goods proportionally to a person's *worth*, illustrates how the *size* frame modifies the *measure* frame, meaning that relative status significantly impacts the conceptualisation of fairness and balance in justice (Kazen & Roitto 2024:43). This interplay complicates the tension between justice and domination, as hierarchies can inspire competition for honour and status, potentially leading to conflict and abuse. Other cognitive frames also influence broader moral discourse. *accounting*, related to the *MEASURE* frame, and prominent in early Jewish thought, views sin as a debt (Kazen & Roitto 2024:44–47; also see Anderson 2009; Nel 2017). While it draws on interpersonal experiences, its primary application is often in the hierarchical human-divine relationship, where divine power tracks human transgression.

The conceptual frames underlying Matthew 7:1–5

The following conceptual frames and approaches from Kazen and Roitto's study apply to Matthew 7:1–5. Matthew 7:2 explicitly states that the judgement of others made by disciples will determine how they will be judged by God. They will determine the measure by which they are measured. This directly aligns with the *measure* frame, as it concerns the reciprocal application of standards and expectations of equitable treatment. Closely related to the *MEASURE* frame, *accounting* conceptualises moral issues in terms of debt and credit, with a divine power (God) keeping track of human transgressions and merits. The warning in Matthew 7:1–2 about being judged by the same measure, suggests a divine accounting system where one's judgement of others impacts their own divine judgement. Kazen and Roitto (2024:46) state that a unique aspect of Jewish thought was the conceptualisation of God as an accountant who keeps track of sin and monitors who forgives. The Matthean Jesus's similar understanding of the role of God in determining interpersonal relationships reflects the Matthean community's ongoing debate on the nature of its relationship with Judaism (Viljoen 2006:244–246). As stated above, the

size frame relates to hierarchy, status, honour, and shame. The act of judging others, particularly pointing out a ‘speck in your neighbour’s eye’ while having a ‘log in your own’, can be interpreted as an attempt to assert superiority or dominance by highlighting another’s flaws, which aligns with how moral infringements often involve issues of status violation and shaming in agonistic cultures. The *hypocrite* who judges others is implicitly attempting to elevate their own standing. The Matthean Jesus’s critique of the judgement of others, without regard for the location of the position of the one criticising the other, is, however, at odds with the prevailing agonistic culture in the 1st-century Mediterranean world. The ancient Mediterranean world was characterised by pervasive asymmetric relationships where equality was rare. Patron-client bonds, ruler-subject dynamics and the hierarchical positioning of freed slaves below the freeborn, as well as women and children in subordinate roles, exemplified these power imbalances. Within such asymmetric structures, those in subordinate positions had little choice but to endure various forms of mistreatment and abuse. Meanwhile, those wielding power possessed the discretion to punish, ignore, or show mercy toward wrongdoers, with their response often determined by whether the offence posed a threat to their own position and authority (Kazen & Roitto 2024:20, 102). It is therefore important to determine if the teaching of the Matthean Jesus in Matthew 7:1–5 reflects Jesus’s consistent understanding of the abundant righteousness demanded by him in Matthew, as applying to all disciples irrespective of their social position. In this regard, the advantage of identifying the conceptual frames underlying verses 1–5 is that it enables us to determine to what extent the parabolic teaching of Jesus corresponds to his non-parabolic teaching.

Kazen and Roitto’s conceptual frames in Matthew’s Gospel

The conceptual frames identified in Matthew 7:1–5 (*measure*, *accounting* and *size*), represent consistent conceptual patterns throughout Matthew’s Gospel, demonstrating the evangelist’s systematic use of these metaphorical frameworks to structure moral discourse. The *measure* frame, emphasising reciprocal standards and equitable treatment, appears prominently throughout Matthew’s Gospel. In Matthew 6:14–15, the reciprocal nature of forgiveness is explicitly stated: εἰ γὰρ ἀφήτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν, ἀφήσει καὶ ὑμῖν ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος· ἐὰν δὲ μὴ ἀφήτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις (τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν), οὐδὲ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ἀφήσει τὰ παραπτώματα ὑμῶν. This establishes a clear measure-for-measure principle in which divine action mirrors human behaviour. The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Mt 18:23–35) exemplifies the *measure* frame through its narrative structure and explicit monetary calculations. The king’s question to the unmerciful servant, οὐκ ἔδει καὶ σὲ ἐλεῆσαι τὸν σύνδουλόν σου, ὡς κἀγὼ σε ἠλέησα, demonstrates the expectation of proportional response. The parable’s conclusion reinforces this reciprocal measure: οὕτως καὶ ὁ πατὴρ μου ὁ οὐράνιος ποιήσει ὑμῖν, ἐὰν μὴ ἀφήτε ἕκαστος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν ὑμῶν. The parable in Matthew

25:14–30 operates on principles of proportional expectation and return, where servants are judged according to how they handle what they’ve been given. The master’s response to the faithful servants, εὖ, δοῦλε ἀγαθὲ καὶ πιστέ, ἐπὶ ὀλίγα ἦς πιστός, ἐπὶ πολλῶν σε καταστήσω (Mt 25:21, 230) reflects the proportional nature of the divine reward based on faithfulness.

The *accounting* frame, which conceptualises moral issues as divine bookkeeping of debts and credits, permeates Matthew’s Gospel through various parables and teachings. In Matthew 6:19–21, Jesus contrasts earthly and heavenly treasures: μὴ θησαυρίζετε ὑμῖν θησαυροὺς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς [...] θησαυρίζετε δὲ ὑμῖν θησαυροὺς ἐν οὐρανῷ. This passage establishes God as the ultimate keeper of accounts who tracks what truly matters, with the metaphorical language of accumulating and storing representing moral actions as ‘bankable commodities’. The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant again serves as a prime example of the *accounting* frame, with its detailed monetary calculations contrasting μύρια τάλαντα against ἑκατὸν δηνάρια. These accounting terms present moral relationships in terms of debts, forgiveness as debt cancellation (ἀφῆκεν αὐτῷ τὸ δάνειον), and divine judgement as the restoration of the original debt. The parable’s accounting logic makes the servant’s inability to forgive a much smaller debt particularly egregious within this framework. Some of Matthew’s parables, however, challenge the *accounting* frame. The Workers in the Vineyard parable (Mt 20:1–16), for example, challenges conventional accounting logic while still operating within an accounting framework of wages, contracts, and fairness. The landowner’s question, οὐκ ἔξόν μοι ἔστιν ὁ θέλω ποιῆσαι ἐν τοῖς ἑμοῖς, subverts expected accounting principles while maintaining the metaphorical structure of divine economy. The Final Judgement scene (Mt 25:31–46) presents the ultimate divine accounting, where deeds of mercy and neglect are tallied and result in eternal consequences. The king’s accounting of actions, καθ’ ὅσον ἐποιήσατε ἐν τούτων τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου τῶν ἐλαχίστων, ἔμοι ἐποιήσατε, demonstrates how individual acts are recorded and calculated in the divine ledger.

What makes the conceptual frame underlying Matthew’s ethics unique is the way the *size* frame, relating to hierarchy, status, honour, and shame, is critiqued. This is particularly prominent in Matthew’s critique of religious leaders and his teachings on true greatness. Matthew 23:1–12 extensively employs *size* language in condemning the scribes and Pharisees who φιλοῦσιν δὲ τὴν πρωτοκλισίαν ἐν τοῖς δέιπνοις καὶ τὰς πρωτοκαθεδρίας ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς. The passage culminates in the principle of hierarchical reversal: πᾶς δὲ ὁ ὑψῶν ἑαυτὸν ταπεινωθήσεται καὶ ὁ ταπεινῶν ἑαυτὸν ὑψωθήσεται. The discourse on greatness in the kingdom (Mt 18:1–4) also directly addresses status hierarchy through the disciples’ question, τίς ἄρα μείζων ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν. Jesus’s response uses a child as an example for true greatness: ὃς οὖν ταπεινώσει ἑαυτὸν ὡς τὸ παιδίον τοῦτο, οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ μείζων ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν, inverting conventional status markers. The request of James and John’s mother (Mt 20:20–28) explicitly discusses positions of honour with her petition: εἰπέ ἵνα καθίσωσιν οὗτοι οἱ δύο υἱοὶ μου εἷς ἐκ δεξιῶν σου καὶ εἷς ἐξ ἐξωνύμων σου ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ σου. Jesus’s response

redefines greatness through service: ὁς ἂν θέλη ἐν ὑμῖν μέγας γενέσθαι, ἔσται ὑμῶν διάκονος, fundamentally challenging conventional honour-shame hierarchies.

The conceptual frames used by Kazen and Roitto that underlie Matthew 7:1–5, in view of the above, are not isolated occurrences but represent consistent conceptual patterns throughout Matthew's Gospel. The evangelist repeatedly employs these metaphorical frameworks – *measure*, *accounting*, and *size* – to structure moral discourse, creating a coherent theological system where divine justice operates through principles of reciprocity, moral bookkeeping, and inverted status hierarchies. This systematic use suggests that Matthew's conceptualisation of moral relationships was deeply influenced by these cultural and cognitive metaphors, which would have been readily understood by his ancient Mediterranean audience and continue to provide insight into the Gospel's ethical framework.

Conclusion

Following the steps identified by Akpan and Viljoen has made it apparent that Matthew 7:1–5 and the parable of the speck and beam is directed at maintaining inter-community relationships between fellow believers. While Kazen and Roitto do not explicitly discuss Matthew 7:1–5, their work provides a robust set of tools, particularly the *measure*, *accounting*, and *size* conceptual frames for understanding the passage's underlying moral logic, social dynamics and cognitive processes within the 1st-century Mediterranean world. In contrast to its dominant values of honour and shame, the Matthean Jesus emphasises the importance of not challenging the honour of others by condemning them. Both inconsistent measuring and overcritical judging distort reciprocity in interpersonal relationships. For the Matthean Jesus, forgiveness and generosity should take precedence over judging and measuring others. While unfair standards invite harsher divine judgement, God's generous measurements, as indicated in the Matthean narrative, should shape human behaviour. The parable itself prioritises self-criticism over negative stereotyping of others, while the Golden Rule in Matthew 7:12, to which it is linked conceptually, goes even further by reversing this stance. The abundant righteousness demanded by the Matthean Jesus, furthermore, upends the power hierarchies that shaped the ancient Mediterranean world. It is thus apparent that in the relatively short rhetorical unit of Matthew 7:1–15 the conceptual frames and rhetorical strategy of Matthew, based on Divine reciprocity, provide key insights into the abundant righteousness that characterised the kingdom of Heaven.

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