

Judging Our Brothers

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Few subjects cause as much confusion as judgment. Is it proper to judge? If so, when? Why do we so often make poor judgments? How do we become more godly judges?

Is any subject more mystifying to Christian life than judging? We are familiar with Matthew 7:1 where Jesus says, "Judge not, that you be not judged." Yet Jesus also says in John 7:24, "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment." On the one hand, do not judge; on the other, judge!

No contradiction exists here because, as we will see, judging is necessary for everyone, Christian and non-Christian. But for the Christian, if he is to come out of sin, he must be able to discriminate between righteousness and evil.

The apostle Paul says, "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (I Corinthians 11:1). How can one imitate both Christ and Paul unless he can discern they are both living by the same code of behavior? How can one study God's Word for instruction in righteousness without self-evaluation? The Bible instructs us, "Test all things; hold fast what is good" (I Thessalonians 5:21). Doing this requires judgment, discerning what is good from evil.

When we add what Paul wrote in I Corinthians 4:5, "Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes," it becomes apparent that there are things to be judged and things not to be judged. We must judge, but we are permitted to carry that judgment only so far. If the judgment is carried farther than God permits, we have gone beyond the bounds of our authority and intruded into someone else's.

In tennis matches line judges evaluate whether balls hit by players are in bounds or out. Each judge is responsible only for his assigned line, because from his vantage point he cannot accurately perceive the ball's relationship to lines elsewhere on the court. The judge may accurately see one small area, but he simply cannot see the whole court with complete accuracy. Thus, he is not called upon to judge areas outside his authority.

So it is in Christian life. God says, "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19). This scripture clearly defines an area in which we have a responsibility to judge: to choose life we must judge between alternatives. Most of the judging we are permitted—indeed required—to do involves judging for ourselves which way we should go. But our area of responsibility for judging immediately narrows once we move beyond judging ourselves.

That is why Jesus states this warning in Matthew 7:2: "For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the same measure you use, it will be measured back to you." "Be careful," He says. "You are stepping into a minefield when you begin to judge your brother!" Because the dangers are hidden, minefields are especially deadly, and judging beyond our area of authority is just as dangerous. If we ignore the warning and continue pressing forward, judging beyond our authority will blow up in our faces, ripping us to shreds!

Why are we warned so strongly against judging others? In *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, p. 892, Spiros Zodhiates writes, explaining the difference between the words *krites* and *dikastes* (both meaning "judge"):

Krites, as used of God (Hebrews 10:30; 12:23; James 4:12) involves the inherent power to discern the character of a person. Similarly it is an attribute of Christ in the same manner as it is an attribute of God (Acts 10:42; II Timothy 4:8; James 5:9). On the human level, a *krites* is one who makes a judgment as to the character and actions of others without receiving such appointment from someone [*i.e.* God did not give us the authority] whereas *dikastes* implies a responsibility attributed by society and others. Therefore *dikastes* is more of a forensic term, a judicial judge, while *krites* is one who uses his subjective criteria to evaluate others.

A Hypothetical Situation

Suppose one sunny afternoon in going about your business you saw John Ritenbaugh walk out of a tavern, suddenly lift his hand to his forehead, take a few steps, stagger and fall. I lay on the side walk until a policeman arrived and spoke to me for a few moments. Shortly, a patrol car arrived, and the policeman assisted me to my feet and put me into the back seat of his car. The car then pulled into traffic and went off with sirens blaring.

Stunned, you continued on your way, but the first person you saw also knew me. Judging the situation, you told the other person that John Ritenbaugh had staggered out of a tavern stone drunk in the middle of the afternoon, and had been hauled off to jail by the police to dry out. I hope that really would not have been your judgment, but from the circumstance, it might seem "obvious."

The truth of the matter was that I met with a prospective member who worked in the tavern as a dishwasher. His employer would not give him the time off to meet with me elsewhere, but had given his permission to meet with me in a booth in the tavern for an hour. When I opened the door to leave the darkened tavern, stepping into the bright sunlight, I was momentarily blinded. My foot hit an uneven section of sidewalk, staggering me so that I fell and struck my head on the concrete. The policeman ran up to help and summoned a car to take me to a hospital to be treated for my head injury.

In this situation, the limitations of human judgment can be clearly seen. So many events important to judging righteous judgment, and not according to appearance, occur out of the direct experience of the viewer. The judgment cannot help to be subjective, given the powerful tendency of human nature to jump to negative conclusions. Subjective means "conditioned by one's own characteristics or experience." A human's field of perception, his point of view, is simply too limited, being almost entirely subjective, to enable him to judge adequately the character of others.

Forbidden to Pass Judgment

Paul carries this point farther: "But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ" (Romans 14:10). The very fact that we are sinning human beings under judgment disqualifies us from judging. Our manner of life in the past has so perverted our judgment that we are incapable of judging with the fairness of God. Our judgment is too subjective to be fair, too influenced by our own experiences to consider all the nuances of another's life to judge without prejudice. Not until after we have lived a life of

overcoming and are rid of this body and mind of flesh will we be in a position to judge the lives of others.

Since we are obviously empowered to judge between right and wrong, and commanded to choose the right even when evaluating the conduct of others, the judging that God forbids is the passing of judgment against another. In other words, God forbids the handing down of a sentence. It is one thing to call a spade a spade and decide that such an act is evil, but to condemn the person as evil, implying incorrigibility, is stepping into the minefield.

James cautions:

Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and destroy. Who are you to judge another? (James 4:11-12)

Does not the law say to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39)? If we speak evil of a brother, we are indirectly impugning the law that commands us to love our brother. This is actually passing judgment on the God who inspired the Bible to read "love your neighbor as yourself." God is quite capable of passing judgment on those responsible for keeping His law!

Paul, embroiled in a situation where he was being judged for the way he conducted his affairs as God's apostle, gives some excellent advice:

Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts; and then each one's praise will come from God. (I Corinthians 4:1-5)

Passing judgment on someone based on our narrow perspective and subjectivity is an exercise in futility and vain, with nothing of spiritual value to be gained from it. That is why God does not want us doing it. Its prime motivator is to elevate (*cf.* verse 6) or justify the self. Paul did not even pass judgment on himself! He certainly examined himself because he wrote to this same church, "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Prove yourselves" (II Corinthians 13:5). Then why did he say he did not judge himself? Because we all are saved by grace through faith. We certainly are not saved by our own favorable judgment of our conduct. Though he could find nothing wrong with his conduct in this situation, he still would not step into Christ's area of authority as Judge. Even his blamelessness did not justify him.

Many things we judge in others are trivial and sometimes extremely "picky." Many situations do not involve sin at all but simply different ways of doing things. We tend to pounce on situations or characteristics that will hardly mean a thing a year from now—and certainly will matter nothing in a thousand years. There may be nothing wrong with pointing them out to someone concerned, but why focus on them to the point we pass judgment on the person? There is a right way to do this that can be the subject of another article.

Humility and Longsuffering

Why can we not follow Paul's admonition in Ephesians 4:1-2? "I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to have a walk worth of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love. . . ." Later, he says:

Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you. Therefore be followers of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. (Ephesians 4:29-5:2)

Finally, in Colossians 3:12-15 he writes:

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.

There is no clear rule to know when one "crosses the line" into passing judgment. We only know from God's Word that it is an area to be *very* wary of. Passing judgment on the one hand is futile because we are not equipped to do it well. On the other hand, it is dangerous business because it usurps the Father and Christ's prerogative as Judges.

These reasons force us to study God's Word intently so that, as these situations arise, we can properly discern our responsibility and approach to our brothers in Christ.