

## Our Personal Plumblines

### Judging Ourselves

David F. Maas

Given 16-Oct-03; Sermon #FT03-10

The inspiration for this message came back on October 14, 2000. Right on this podium, Frank Simkins gave a message on "Judge or Be Judged." It was on self-correction. I have had great problems struggling with this message, both with the focus and the theme and title. I went through about seven or eight titles. Finally it jelled back, strangely, at Garner Ted Armstrong's funeral on September 18th. I would like to call this sermon "Our Personal Plumblines." Other alternate titles are "Taking Stock: Preparing to Judge Righteously," or "Counting the Cost: In Retrospect." And we could also label it as "Spiritual Self-Study."

How many of you can envision yourself as a judge in God's Kingdom? How many of you feel you are now qualified to assume such a position?

The apostle Paul in his stern warning to the Corinthian brethren about frivolous lawsuits somberly admonished them in I Corinthians 6:3,

**I Corinthians 6:3** Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?

Some may disparage the future responsibility of judging altogether by pointing to the admonition of Christ in Matthew 7:1-2, "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you."

Now actually the term for judging here is transliterated "*Krino*" (Strong's 2919) which means to criticize, condemn or to render a verdict. If you remember Richard's "meddling" sermon (or I mean Richard's sermon on meddling—his busybody sermon) condemning or assigning a verdict is not a prerogative that has been given to us, but it is a responsibility exercised by God the Father and our High Priest Jesus Christ. But the judging that we are commanded to do right now in preparation for our roles in God's Kingdom as priests, we find with the other Greek roots: *Anakrino* (Strong's 350) which means "*to scrutinize, investigate, interrogate, determine or discern.*" In this context judging refers to the process of longitudinally judging, examining something over a long period of time (a lifetime), determining cause/effect relationships, determining the fruits of something, whether good or bad, productive or futile.

Solomon's narrative in Proverbs 24:30-34 illustrates the judging process of *anakrino*.

**Proverbs 24:30** I went by the field of the lazy man, And by the vineyard of the man devoid of understanding; And there it was, all overgrown with thorns; Its surface was covered with nettles; Its stone wall was broken down. When I saw it, I considered it well; I looked on it and received instruction: A little sleep, a little slumber, A little folding of the hands to rest; So shall your poverty come like a prowler, And your need like an armed man.

In the very next section of Proverbs, in Proverbs 25, Solomon indicates that this form of longitudinal judging—examining the fruits, the cause and effects of processes—is a kingly responsibility.

**Proverbs 25:25** It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, But the glory of kings is to search out [scrutinize, investigate, or discern] a matter.

The other Greek root word pertaining to judging is *diakrino* (Strong's 1252), which means "to separate thoroughly, to withdraw from, to oppose, to discriminate or hesitate." *Diakrino* refers to making distinctions between holy/ profane/ moral/ immoral, righteousness and evil—a quality totally out of commission in modern Israel (except in the great state of Texas where we still understand that sodomy is a sin and that homosexual relations are not a very practical way to carry on humanity.) This could be said about the United States Supreme Court or the Florida Supreme Court.

**Isaiah 5:20** Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; Who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!

As future kings and priests in God's kingdom, we realize that our most weighty responsibility will be to exercise righteous judgment—even toward angelic beings. I doubt whether any of us in this room or listening to this audio recording are remotely ready right now for that daunting responsibility.

Some of us may get downright queasy or nauseous when we contemplate the prospect of rendering any kind of judicial decision. I think of the story of the farmer who took on a new hired man, testing his capabilities:

The farmer asked the hired man to throw down some silage for the cattle. The farmer estimated it should take him about a half hour for the chore. The hired man bounded back in ten minutes. "I'm done sir."

"Wow," the farmer replied. "I thought that would take you much longer." Could you stack these bales of hay from the hayrack up into the barn." "Sure." The enthusiastic hired man bounded into the project. Twenty minutes later he returned to the farmer. "I'm done sir."

The farmer then set the hired man about the task of chopping a cord of wood. He estimated it would take at least an hour or so. Fifteen minutes later the hired man returned, having cut two cords of wood.

"That's amazing," the farmer gasped. The farmer then proceeded to have the hired man pull cockleburs from an extremely weedy soybean field—terribly infested with cockleburs. After that he mowed the four-acre lawn with a 2 1/2 horse Briggs & Stratton power mower. When the farmer returned for the noon meal the hired man was helping the farmer's wife husk sweet corn on the front porch.

After the noon meal, the farmer took the enthusiastic hired man down to the cellar and placed him before a pile of potatoes.

"You've worked so hard this morning. I'd like to give you an easier task this afternoon. All you need to do is separate this pile of potatoes into small, medium, and large. Also discard the rotten or moldy ones. I'll come back in a few minutes to see if you got the hang of it."

Fifteen minutes later the farmer returned to find the hired man had fainted dead away. The farmer gently doused the hired man's face with a damp washcloth. "I'm sorry I worked you so hard," the farmer said contritely.

The hired man, who had just revived said plaintively, "Oh no, sir, I don't mind the hard work. It's those decisions that I can't stand."

I will tell you that I can certainly relate to this hapless hired man. I have been teaching English Composition and Literature for over 36 years and I still agonize every time I evaluate a composition or assign a grade.

Back in 1969, my former Department Chair, Dr. Norman Christianson at the University of Wisconsin, once said to me, "Grading is undoubtedly the most hellish aspect of teaching. I would much rather do research, prepare lectures, or file papers, or anything else before grading or evaluating."

Over the years, some of the grades I have assigned to students, even when I realized in my heart of hearts that they had actually deserved them, nevertheless caused me intense mental turmoil and sleeplessness. Last spring, an incomplete grade I assigned to a senior (a grade frankly which should have been an F) caused him not to graduate, making me an enemy of many of his extended family which had come from many states away to see him graduate. I do not relish that kind of responsibility or pressure, but periodically I have to endure it.

Mercifully, God has provided a lifetime practicum for learning to judge righteously. Like Abraham's incremental development of faith (calculating, analyzing, and adding things up), we also learn righteous judgment the same way—learning to see over an entire lifetime the consequences of our thoughts, words, and behaviors, and the impact it has made on our own lives and the lives of others.

After we have soberly counted the cost at baptism, we are obligated to make continuous assessment of our spiritual progress, counting the cost in retrospect. Even though we can do very little to alter the sure and steady consequences of our past behaviors, we still have to count the cost.

Several principles apply to every man, woman, and child who have ever lived.

**Galatians 6:7** Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.

I would like you to turn to another scripture in Numbers 32:23. It has been mentioned here already.

**number 32:23** But if you do not do so, then take note, you have sinned against the LORD; and be sure your sin will find you out.

Some of us, I fear, have assumed because of our calling and our special relationship with God, that these principles somehow do not apply as stringently to us as they do to the people around us. Paul and James clearly teach us that God shows no partiality or favoritism (Romans 2:11)

Brethren, closeness to God (making the covenant with God) brings a grave responsibility. We have heard John mention many times, "To whom much has been given much will be required."

As a consequence of systematically and longitudinally examining our mistakes and transgressions, we can with some precision measure the sure and steady consequences of the "reap what we sow" principle and "our sins will find us" principle, hopefully learning lasting lessons to counsel and help others in the future.

In the words of Soren Kierkegaard, "Life can only be understood backwards; however, it must be lived forwards." Dave Maas has a corollary to this statement: "Unfortunately, when we live our lives forward, we do not have the benefit of hindsight."

Judging is incremental calculation. Herbert W. Armstrong used to say repeatedly: "God cannot create righteous character by fiat. God cannot create character in us. We have to do that on our own." Likewise Abraham the father of the faithful did not develop faith instantaneously, but had to meticulously calculate, add it up so-to-speak, developing his faith incrementally by observing God's track record of faithfulness. Abraham's iron clad faith was developed incrementally as a result of calculating or "adding it all up," matching the promises of God (perceiving His overall intent) with the current situation, realizing from his ongoing relationship with God, that it was impossible for Him to lie. We learn from Abraham's experience to trust God even when we have incomplete data.

As Abraham, Moses, Sarah, and the other heroes of faith incrementally acquired their faith, we also have to acquire our ability to judge through a lifetime practicum of observing cause/effect relationships and metaphorically observing the fruits of what we have personally sown develop. Our ability to judge we acquire like faith incrementally by carefully measuring the effects of our decisions, words, and behaviors upon ourselves and others over a period of time.

American Puritan Clergyman, Statesman and Judge John Winthrop, after he was acquitted of a charge that had exceeded his authority as Judge, gave a famous speech to the court of the Massachusetts Commonwealth. In this message, he commented upon the selection and qualifications of judges and magistrates, stating:

I entreat you to consider that when you choose magistrates you take them from among yourselves, men subject to like passions as you are. Therefore, when you see the infirmities in us, you should reflect upon your own, and that you would make you bear the more with us, and not be severe censurers of the failings of your magistrates when you have continual experience of the like infirmities in yourselves and others.

John Winthrop, when he arrived in America, gave a famous sermon aboard the Arabella, called "A Model of Christian Charity." This was his thesis statement. He locked in on the counsel of Micah 6:8:

**Micah 6:8** He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

Our Elder Brother Jesus Christ had this scripture in mind as He admonished the Pharisees in Matthew 23:23 that this counsel of Micah constituted the weightier matters of the Law:

**Matthew 23:23** Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.

In order to clearly judge the behavior of another individual, it is necessary for the judge to have developed an understanding and, to a great extent, empathy for the weaknesses of the one being judged.

Our Elder Brother is uniquely qualified to be our Judge and High Priest. Why is that?

**Hebrews 4:14-16** Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

A remarkable key to our Elder Brother's sensitivity to our plight comes from the suffering that He had endured as a mortal fleshly human being.

**Hebrews 5:8** though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.

We are currently qualifying for a similar role as priests, as bridge builders or intercessors between God and man just as our Elder Brother now is serving. In order to develop this capability of judging, we need to learn about the preciousness of Eternal life as well as the awful consequences of sin, the destroyer of life and the cause for the separation between God and man and between other human beings.

In Ezekiel 28:12 the Sovereign Lord said of Helel the archangel, "You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty." In verse 15, He adds, "You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created."

This perfection did not develop from the inside out and did not involve a struggle against his own nature. Perhaps the biggest difference between a created archangel and a regenerated son of God is that the archangel does not comprehend the reality of eternal oblivion and the enormous consequences of sin. The angelic being does not have to struggle against these intense downward pulls in order to affirm with every fiber of his being that he wants to keep and fulfill God's Holy Law. With angelic beings, it is not so much a matter of volition or choice as wired in instinct. God desires his sons and daughters to want, of their own volition, to choose God's way of life.

To judge with mercy, we have to be subject to the same downward pulls as the individuals we will eventually judge in our role as a member of the God family. I was thinking of the words of our former Secretary of Agriculture Butz got into trouble one time making a joke about the Pope and his ruling on birth control, quipping, "He no play the game.; he no make-a the rules." In order for us to presume to judge someone else, we must walk two miles in his moccasins (according to the old Lakota proverb).

We have been warned repeatedly that God's judgment begins with the House of God, the Israel of God, or the greater church of God.

**Peter 4:17** For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?

I would like to encourage all of you to lock in on those Friday night Bible Studies in the book of Amos. I think that the time frame which they were given back in 1989 are eerily prophetic right now.

**Amos 7:7-9** Thus He showed me: Behold, the Lord stood on a wall made with a plumb line, with a plumb line in His hand. And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said: "Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of My people Israel; I will not pass by them anymore. The high places of Isaac shall be desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste. I will rise with the sword against the house of Jeroboam."

Do you know what plumb line is? It is cord with a lead bob attached to one end and is used by plumbers and carpenters to determine perpendicularity so they can put beams, etc. straight.

The prophet Amos, like a circling hawk, makes dire pronouncements on all of Israel's enemies, but he reserves the harshest judgment for Israel, **who should have known better**, having made the covenant with Almighty God, but profaning their calling by drifting into moral complacency.

God's church, the Israel of God, the greater church of God must realize that closeness to God comes with a weighty responsibility. God's justice is the same for everybody; He is no respecter of persons. The church is warned not to mix His truth and pagan (or worldly) error in the manner of Jeroboam I. We desperately need to cultivate (with the help of God's Holy Spirit) an ardent love of the truth.

Our previous fellowship lost this ardent desire of the truth, following the practices of syncretistically mixing the truth of God with rank pagan error and worldliness. Jesus Christ obviously spit this lukewarm concoction out of His mouth. Now we find ourselves as globs of spit in myriad splinters. The judgment process still goes on. Our obligation is to conduct a thorough self-study to determine whether our conduct, thoughts, or behavior is in sync with God's truth.

The most urgent judging we need to be involved in right now is to judge ourselves—applying the plumb line to our own thoughts, words, or deeds, making sure they are absolutely in sync with God's Word:

I am using the Amplified Bible at this point to read I Corinthians 11:31. "For if we searchingly examined ourselves (detecting our shortcomings and recognizing our own condition), we should not be judged and penalty decreed (by the divine judgment).

Amazingly, since 1973, for the last 30 years every educational institution in which I have served (National College of Business, Ambassador College, Texas College, Jarvis College, and Wiley College) has either been seeking accreditation or been under review for accreditation. It is a very arduous process. We (faculty) often refer to it as an invasive proctology exam, probing into every crack and crevice of the institution. Here, for example, is the self study we just finished for the Southern Association of Schools and College for Wiley College.

The self study consists of a set of criteria. There are about 80 "must" statements covering every aspect of the institution from its Mission statement to its physical resources, its human resources, plus the evidence that we are complying with these "must" statements. Strangely I have been responsible for Section 4.1 (that is one of the 80 "Must" statements for the Educational Program). I am not going to read all of them, but read enough to give you a flavor of it:

1. All aspects of the educational program **must** be clearly related to the purpose of the institution.
2. The institution **must** provide a competent faculty, adequate library/learning resources and appropriate computer resources, instructional materials/equipment and physical facilities.
3. The student enrollment and financial resources of an institution **must** be sufficient to support an effective educational program.

We worked for months conducting interviews, finding appropriate documentation and concrete evidence that we were in compliance with these must statements. Almost all of the faculty (including myself) grumbled at having being forced to undergo such an irksome process. Our chief, Dr. Strickland, admonished us, "What SACS wants for us, we should desire even more for ourselves."

Some of our brethren have erroneously blamed the seeking of accreditation for the demise of Ambassador College and the Worldwide Church of God. Having participated in that process, I am here to tell you that more than 90 percent of the things attributed to accreditation or blamed on accreditation were patently untrue.

The accreditation process with its arduous self-study provides an excellent parallel to the kind of spiritual self study we must conduct before every Passover. Like the SACS criteria, we also have "Must" statements outlined in God's laws, statutes, and judgments. The examples provided by our Elder Brother Jesus Christ, the patriarchs, and prophets, serve as the criteria for accomplishment.

All the accreditation process ever demanded from Ambassador or any other institution is that we can document what we say we will do, or what we actually will do. We do this on an ongoing basis by assessment records. Every semester we must submit a minimum of three or four outcomes to assess. There are striking parallels to our own overcoming goals. We must continuously identify specific character traits that we want to modify, faults we want to overcome, incrementally, with the help of God's Holy Spirit.

We need to be aware of specific outcomes we want to accomplish. The development of the fruits of God's Holy Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 (love, joy, peace, patience, and the like), and then the elimination of the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21 is a good place to begin. Over the years all of us have accumulated perennial faults, some of them perhaps have been identified in these last three verses, in verses 19-21.

What perennial faults do we have? Is it lack of self control? Is it a trigger temper? Is it overeating, or excessive debt from not controlling our lusts for things? What occupies our thoughts on a continual basis? What kind of things are we perennially praying about? Remember in Proverbs 23:7, what we think in our heart all day long, that is what we are. What do we pray about? Is it lack of organization or ability to plan? What painful turns have our lives taken? Have we suffered a debilitating disease

like diabetes? Have we gone through divorce? Have we lost a spouse? Have we lost offspring? I think that is one of the most gut-wrenching things I have ever gone through. Have we been subject to unfair legal decisions from an unrighteous judge?

What foolish decisions have we made which have caused indelible heartache to ourselves and others? The patriarchs of old had to live with the consequences of foolish decisions. Moses did not walk into the promised land. Abraham had to live with the consequences of a polygamous family relationship, partly as the result of not initially trusting God, and our current problem in the Middle East stems from that foolish decision.

Jacob had to live with the consequences of conniving and cheating. Samson had to live with the consequences of lust and self-indulgence. David had to live with the consequences of adultery, murder, and bad child rearing. We need to, over the course of our lives, reflect upon the effects that our behaviors have had on others and ourselves. We may have to resign ourselves to the reality that some of the things we have hopelessly botched up in this life will not be repaired until the other side of the grave. We carry the trace memories of our sins throughout life. Dr. Laura Schlesinger has often stated that there are some things that when they are broken cannot be fixed.

Emily Dickinson once referred to remorse as memory awake:

Remorse is cureless, the disease  
Not even God can heal  
For 'tis His institution  
The complement of hell

Alfred Korzybski, the father of General Semantics, once said, "God can forgive your sins, but your nervous system will never let you forget." The apostle Paul years after his conversion cringed at what he had done earlier in his life. Though our High Priest has promised to have our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, the trace memories of our foolishness never quite leave us, nor are they intended to. God Almighty wants each of us individually to have our bellies full of the consequences of sin and to feel the full psychological impact of our sinful behavior so that we will come to hate it as much as He does.

Raymond McNair (I took the Life and Teachings of Jesus class back in 1986) asked all of us students to write down a little aphoristic statement on the bottom of a scantron exam. He said, "Class, if you do not take anything else from this class, at least take this principle, six little words:

Sin Never Pays  
Righteousness Always Pays

Some of us have had to learn this little aphorism with literal blood and tears. Solomon, in Ecclesiastes 7:13, admonishes,

**Ecclesiastes 7:13** In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider

He means judge, weigh, evaluate, ponder, think about it, consider. As we reflect over the point events of our life, good or bad or whatever, we need to soberly reflect on the fruits of our behaviors. Could it be that what we have struggled mightily to overcome will enable or qualify us to be a teacher or a counselor—a judge to those having similar proclivities? Think about that.

**Isaiah 30:20-21** And though the Lord gives you The bread of adversity and the water of affliction, Yet your teachers [Brothers and sisters, this verse refers to us] will not be moved into a corner anymore, But your eyes shall see your teachers. Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it,"