

The Weightier Matters (Part 2): Judgment

by Staff

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Last month's introduction examined the attitudes of the Scribes and Pharisees and described Christ's extreme frustration with them. Our Savior admonished them to revamp their perverted thinking. They were to *continue* keeping the lesser aspects of the law, but to *emphasize* the weightier matters. The first of these is **judgment**.

We tend to think of judgment as the eternal judgment and the sorting of sheep to the right and goats to the left at the return of Jesus Christ. While this ultimately comes into play, we first need to examine some elements of judgment in the "here and now" rather than the "there and then." For the converted Christian, judgment is *now* on the house of God (I Peter 4:17).

As used in Matthew 23:23 as a weighty matter, "judgment" is from the Greek word *krisis*, meaning "decision for or against" and suggesting a tribunal or formal judgment. It implies "justice." Justice has several meanings, the first of which is "impartial adjustment of conflicting claims or assignment of deserved punishment or reward." More simply, when a conflict arises among people, justice is administering what is *just*—"factual, reasonable, faithful, morally upright, good, fair, righteous, impartial and legally correct."

The Pharisees took one element of that definition—the "legally correct" part—and based their relationships with others on it, conveniently deleting fairness, impartiality, reasonableness, etc. from their thinking. Christ wanted them to be legally correct, for it is part of proper decision-making, but there is more to it than that!

No Judging Allowed?

Some cite Matthew 7:1 as proof that we should do no judging whatsoever: "Judge not, that you be not judged." Here, the Greek word for "judge" is *krino*, meaning to condemn, avenge, damn, sentence or levy a punishment. Christ plainly says that if we condemn others, we will be condemned ourselves. Dangerous territory indeed!

Though it is certainly hazardous to evaluate the problems or sins of others, the context answers the question of whether we are to do so. We **are** to judge and in every aspect of life, as other scriptures show. Christ continues His thought, in context, by showing that we **are** to evaluate the deeds of others, but to be very careful with our judgments. We should consider our weaknesses and sins very carefully, to the point of overcoming them, before we make harsh judgments on others. How can we condemn someone else when we may have even bigger problems? He instructs us to remove the hypocrisy and then we can help our brother with his difficulties.

Focusing on the Greek to show that "condemning" defines judgment better than "justice" really makes no difference. The sense of the context is proper evaluation of our own and others' conduct so that proper justice is done. If we wish to use a harsher definition, such as condemnation or damnation, then Christ is saying He will also evaluate us in that light. Major or minor infraction, light or harsh judgment, the outcome is the same: "As you do unto others, so shall it be done unto you!"

Christ's initial statement about judgment cannot be ripped out of context to stand on its own. We **must** understand it considering His whole explanation, which includes recognition of others' sins and their disposition, but only after overcoming our own faults.

Otherwise, Matthew 7:1 directly contradicts John 7:24 where He uses the same Greek words: "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge [*krino*] with righteous judgment." Here He says we are to judge, but He mitigates it with instruction on *how* to judge, just as in Matthew 7. Certainly, we are to analyze—judge—what is right or wrong, based on the mind of God as expressed in His Word. How we *apply* that judgment to others is critical, for Christ will take the same attitude with us that we take with others.

We commonly use such expressions as "I trust his judgment" or "I think I'm a good judge of character." At other times, it may not be so positive. We may not have confidence in a person, because having lived with them or observed them from a distance, we do not feel they use wisdom, discretion, self-control or kindness in their relationships. Thus, we make the decision to be careful around them. We may even form an unfavorable opinion of their competence or honesty. In short, we make a judgment, good or bad, of their character.

While the negative side of this may seem harsh—for we do not wish to "sit in judgment" or condemnation—the process is necessary. We do it every day. We weigh all the known factors of a person, for truly "you do not sell a vacuum cleaner, but yourself" as trainers of salesmen pontificate. Unless we correctly judge not only the circumstances, but the salesman, we may end up with too many vacuum cleaners, a portfolio of worthless stocks and bonds or a "cherry" used car that is really a "lemon."

We might also find ourselves sitting in church listening to a wolf in sheep's clothing who sounds like an angel of light. Is proper judgment important? Correctly spotting the wolf is one form of judgment.

Like it or not, life forces us to make judgments or decisions about people every day. These may deal with mundane physical things or with friendships or marriages that affect a lifetime. Many have gone through life wishing they had been equipped early in life to render and exercise sounder judgments, for the process of making good calls can be very confusing. It is so easy to dwell on the wrong factors or see only what is on the surface.

Preparing for marriage is a particularly worrisome time of evaluation. Is the person one is contemplating marrying *really* converted? If children enter the picture, will this person be a loving, understanding parent? Will he or she properly discipline them? We need to research thoroughly, contemplate and test that individual before making a final judgment and entering a lifetime contract! "Snap judgments" made without enough information produce grief, as do judgments based on our lust, vanity, jealousy or greed. Such selfish decisions cause us to ignore the facts to satisfy our baser desires.

Our Purpose in Life

Making proper judgments and ensuring "justice is done" is a constant, unrelenting daily challenge. This is true in business decisions, untangling sibling controversies, marital spats, friendships and Christian relationships.

There is a reason that it is this way! Our whole purpose in this life is *to learn to render proper judgments of right and wrong and to exercise wisdom*. God is putting us through the paces now to train us to be leaders, teachers, kings and priests—members of the very God Family—ruling and managing angels and men. Our job is to learn to do it right.

While the sovereign God of the universe will ultimately make final judgments on all men and be sure "justice is done," He does so very carefully with each individual over a lifetime, beginning early in life. Solomon writes, "Even a child is known by his deeds, by whether what he does is pure and right" (Proverbs 20:11). He expands on this in Ecclesiastes 11:9: "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes; *but know that for all these God will bring you into judgment.*"

In Proverbs, God shows that He ponders our hearts: "If you say 'Surely we did not know this,' does not He who weighs the hearts consider it? He who keeps your soul, does He not know it? And will He not render to each man according to his deeds?" (Proverbs 24:12; see Proverbs 5:21; 21:2). He does not make snap decisions with us over isolated incidents, but watches us over a period of time and in a variety of circumstances, some of which He creates Himself, as in Job's case.

God treats people in positions of influence a little differently. Teachers receive a sterner judgment (James 3:1) simply because they are in a teaching position. Lest hypocrisy reign, teachers must first live it themselves. God instructed the kings of ancient Israel to read the Bible every day (Deuteronomy 17:19) because they had power and leadership among the people.

All the commandments, statutes, precepts and judgments found in the Bible are still valid and important for us. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). He changes not (Malachi 3:6). Old Testament principles are still valid today because they reflect the thinking of God. God wants us to have the mind of Christ and to bring every thought into captivity. He commands us to live by His every word.

Then why is circumcision *nothing*? Circumcision as a physical thing is absolutely nothing. Paul says so in Scripture (I Corinthians 7:19). However, the principle of circumcision is just as valid today as it was in ancient Israel.

Today circumcision of the heart and mind is very important. It is much harder to discern. How can we know if a person is really converted? Whether the flesh of a male's genitalia has been cut means nothing. Fruits of the Spirit, borne out in living faith as expressed in good works—love toward God and man—means everything!

God wants us to look deeper than the physical, to judge righteous judgment. Only He can really determine the heart, and even He ponders it over time. For us, He says to look at the fruits. We are to analyze people and their doings. How else can we choose mates, friends, brothers in Christ and ministers or teachers?

In I Corinthians 3:1-3, Paul judges the Corinthian church as carnal. He goes on to instruct us to avoid those found practicing immorality (I Corinthians 5:1-5; see Romans 16:17-18; II Thessalonians 3:6; Titus 3:10-11). Paul devotes all of I Corinthians 6 to handling judgments in the church rather than taking them to the world's judges. Our lives are practice sessions in making sound, wise judgments!

If we combine Acts 6:1-4, where the apostles asked the people to recommend candidates for deacon, with I Timothy 3:1-13, where Paul lists the qualifications of elders and deacons, we see that judgments of character must be made. Certain qualifications must be met. The Bible is full of such instructions requiring us to evaluate others and circumstances.

The Pharisees' First Mistake

The Pharisees made their first major error in this area of judgment. They had abandoned the proper yardstick for their basis of judgment. As Matthew 15:1-9 shows, they had developed their own traditions that transgressed the law of God (verse 3). Their worship had become vain—worthless—as they substituted the doctrines of men for the doctrines of God (verse 9).

The Pharisees had lost touch with God's instructions, His mind. They leaned on carnal reasoning, which always decided in their favor. Situation ethics ruled, rather than the precepts of God. They became very harsh in their dealings with the "little people," taking advantage of them simply because they could (Micah 2:1-2).

"A just weight and balance are the Lord's; all the weights in the bag are His work. It is an abomination for kings to commit wickedness, for a throne is established by righteousness" (Proverbs 16:11-12). Though the Pharisee's "additions" to the law seemed innocent enough at their inception, over time they became increasingly partial to those who made the additions. This destroyed godly standards, and wickedness reigned. Since the leaders' righteousness had been destroyed, their leadership was void of justice. Significantly, the Bible's final warning is not to add to or subtract from God's Word (Revelation 22:18-19), for our own judgments do not have the purity and objectivity of God's.

This problem never seems to go away. Christ excoriated the Pharisees for it. James addressed the church about it because some were showing partiality to the wealthy in the congregations (James 2:1-12). And who knows how many sermons have been given on it since!

Decision-making, judging, discerning and evaluating fruits often become subjective. We base them on how they may affect our own well-being rather than render them impartially and objectively in the light of God's Word purified seven times (Psalm 12:6). Is it any wonder God gives us an average of 70 years to learn to make right judgments?

We are to use the whole Bible, "every word . . . of God" (Matthew 4:4), "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), to render justice. Each part of the law has varying degrees of importance in rendering proper decisions and ensuring that justice is done. Parents need to consider *all* the scriptures on childrearing, not just the ones that suit their fancies. Where is the balance between applying the rod and showing mercy? What, *today*, is the best way to handle Junior to develop his personality, his character, his integrity?

Why a "Weighty Matter"?

Each of the Ten Commandments can be considered a "weighty" part of the law. The statutes, precepts and judgments, rendered by God and Moses and added to the scriptural record, are not as weighty as the law itself, but are still important, since they show how we should interpret and apply the law.

Christ singled out judgment, mercy and faith as the weightier matters of the law. Why? Since we are discussing judgment here, why is it so weighty? Though the law itself is very important, we can perhaps consider judgment or justice to be even weightier, for it is the aim and purpose of the law. The law's very purpose is to make sure justice is done!

Since God is the very embodiment of love and justice to all without partiality, He did not need the law codified for Himself. **We** need it, along with all the precepts, statutes and judgments based on it because we do not yet have His mind. So He gave us the Bible, which contains enough of God's mind for us to strive toward perfection with it as our daily guide, helping us learn to judge righteous judgment. Within its pages God has written enough laws, principles and circumstances for us to determine the proper course of action in any situation: Which Scripture applies here and now? Do we answer this fool according to his folly or not (Proverbs 26:4-5)? Can we judge him a fool at all (Matthew 5:22)?

The problem is that we have all sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Hold any of our lives up before the pages of the Bible, and we fall far short. If justice were truly done, we would all die eternally, for the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). That is harsh reality. But God is merciful and gives us time and help to correct our course.

The Pharisees tried to live perfectly sinless lives and came to judge anyone falling short of their expectations as far beneath them. Not only had they perverted justice through hypocrisy and partiality, but they had also completely lost the next weighty matter Christ urged them to consider: mercy. We will address that virtue next month.