

How to Judge

If there is any verse in the Bible that our society knows, it's Matthew 7:1. Even people who have never cracked open a Bible in their lives are able to quote from the King James Version, "Judge not that ye be not judged." I'm not sure that they know what a ye is, but they do know that it means that you don't get to tell them they're sinning. Or so they think.

This same spirit can appear even among Christians. I don't know how many times I've been told, especially online, that we aren't supposed to judge someone else's motives, as though there were some blanket prohibition in Scripture against the practice. If such a verse exists anywhere outside of the book of Second Opinions, I've never been able to find it.

In fact, rather than being commanded not to judge, we are commanded to judge. Of course, as with many other commandments, there's a right way and a wrong way to do this. However, with study and practice, our discernment will increase. Let's look this evening, then, at how to judge.

We must begin with judging BY GOD'S LAW. Look at what James writes in James 4:11-12. I think that much of the confusion about judging in Scripture arises from not understanding what Scriptural authors are talking about in verses like this. It's easy to pull out phrases like "Who are you to judge your neighbor?" and conclude that making any kind of judgment is sinful.

However, that's not at all James' point. He's not talking about when we see our neighbor in adultery and say, "It's wrong for you to commit adultery." Instead, he's talking about when we see our neighbor doing something that the Scripture does not condemn—cheering for the University of Alabama, for instance—and telling him, "It's wrong for you to cheer for the University of Alabama."

James points out several problems with condemning what the Bible does not. First, he says, when we do so, we're speaking evil of our neighbor. We're slandering him as an evildoer when according to God's standard, he has done nothing wrong. Second, we are speaking evil of and judging the law. In other words, when we condemn where God's word is silent, we are implying that God's word is imperfect, and we're supplying what is needed to make it perfect. Third, we are looking to supplant God as lawgiver and judge. We're trying to drag Him out of the judgment seat and put ourselves there, even though He can save and destroy, and we can't.

The solution to the problem is to confine ourselves to the Scripture and only to the Scripture. When we repeat what our lawgiver and judge has already said, we are on firm footing. When we stray outside the realm of Scriptural authority, we get into trouble.

Second, we must judge IMPARTIALLY. Here, let's consider James again, this time looking at James 2:1-4. Really, James' words here are an application of the principle he lays out in James 4. The Bible never says that a rich man is worthier than a poor man, but in this example, the Christian host is behaving as though it does. Even though the souls of the rich and the poor are equal in God's eyes, the host is giving the rich man better treatment in the assembly. That makes him a judge with evil motives.

There are many ways we can get into trouble with this one. The first is with the application that James makes. We're just as prone to judge people according to wealth and class as Christians 2000 years ago were. Brother Bill the investment banker all too often gets more respect at church than does Brother Fred the dishwasher at Pizza Hut. Brother Bill gets welcomed at the doors, but Brother Fred gets ignored. Brother Bill's opinion carries more weight with the leadership because they're worried that he's going to take himself and his fat contribution check to another congregation, but they roll their eyes at Brother Fred's opinions. Brethren, that's wrong. When we act like that, we too have become judges with evil motives.

The same holds true when we esteem other Christians more because they come from a well-known church family. It doesn't matter who somebody's daddy, granddaddy, or great-granddaddy was. The only blood that matters in the church is the blood of Jesus Christ. Likewise, we don't dare turn a blind eye to the sin of a brother just because he's our friend, while we hunt for a reason to criticize the brother we don't like. In God's church, there is one rule for everybody, and we must always treat everybody according to that one rule.

Third, we are supposed to judge BY FRUITS. Consider here Matthew 7:15-20. This is one of the most ominous passages in the Bible. Maybe we're happy applying this standard to others, but we rarely want others to apply it to us, and we often shy away from applying it to ourselves.

The problems here, of course, aren't with good fruits. They're with bad fruits. We don't want to acknowledge that our sins say something fundamental about our hearts. Instead, we want to say that good ole us is over here, and our sins are over there, and the connection between the two is muddled and obscure. It's like the impulse to sin comes out of a Magical Mystery Box instead of out of our hearts.

In reality, there is no Magical Mystery Box. There is only our hearts. Evil outside always comes from evil inside. That's true for us, and it's true for others too. In the final analysis, everybody sins because they love themselves more than they love God.

As a result, it is completely legitimate for us to reason backward from bad actions to a bad heart. I can highlight my own heart problems that way, and I can highlight the

heart problems of others too. By my fruits I can know myself, and by their fruits I can know them.

This is true not only for the adulterers and drug addicts of the world. It's also true for the sins that we hesitate to condemn. For instance, I think we're often tempted to excuse our religious friends who deny that baptism is necessary for salvation. "They're good, sincere people," we say. Brethren, we have to look at the fruit, and be honest about what the fruit says. It's not like the Scriptural witness about baptism is unclear. Peter says, "Baptism now saves you." People who deny that are deceiving themselves for some reason. They have a heart problem. Good fruit comes from a good tree, bad fruit from a bad tree. No exceptions.

Fourth, we must judge WITH RIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT. Let's look here at John 7:22-24. A lot of Christians know 7:24 and quote it back at the people who quote Matthew 7:1, but I think fewer actually know what it means.

To figure that out, we have to look at the context. In context, Jesus is addressing the people who are condemning Him for healing on the Sabbath. They say, "It's wrong to work on the Sabbath, but Jesus healed on the Sabbath, so Jesus clearly is a false prophet." QED, right?

Not so fast, says Jesus. He points out that even the Jews acknowledge that sometimes it's necessary to work on the Sabbath. Take, for instance, the rite of circumcision. The Law required that every Jewish boy had to be circumcised on his eighth day of life, so every boy who was born on Saturday had to be circumcised on Saturday. Why? Because it was God's will. In the same way, Jesus says, it's God's will for Him to heal (otherwise He couldn't do it), so it's acceptable for Him to heal on the Sabbath.

From this, we can conclude that judging with righteous judgment means being careful to consider all the Scriptural evidence before making our judgment. Judging with unrighteous judgment, by contrast, means making a hasty, simplistic judgment without thinking everything through first.

Let me give you an example. There are those who condemn vacation Bible schools because they say they're a denominational practice. The logic is, I think, that denominations are wrong, so anything they come up with is also wrong.

That, friends, is an unrighteous judgment. It simply doesn't go far enough in considering the issue from a Biblical standpoint. It doesn't ask whether a VBS is a logical extension of the Lord's command to preach the gospel to every creature. It doesn't ask whether a church can hold a VBS as part of its responsibility to be the pillar and support of the truth. In order to make a righteous judgment, we have to answer questions like that before we judge.

Finally, we must judge WITHOUT HYPOCRISY. Here, we come at last to Matthew 7:1-5. Once again, this is a text where context is key. When we see, “Do not judge so that you will not be judged,” we have to remember that the “you” of 7:1 is the same “you” of 7:3-5, the “you” with a log in his eye who is engaged in speck removal.

From beginning to end, the whole context is a warning against hypocrisy. Jesus’ point is this: before you get too self-righteous about somebody else’s violation of God’s law, remember that you yourself will be judged according to the same holy standard, and it may well be that your spiritual problems are worse than the problems you are so eager to condemn.

This text, then, isn’t really a blanket prohibition against judging. It’s a call to humility and self-examination. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day badly needed to hear this. After all, they were in the habit of blasting others for eating with unwashed hands while they themselves had forgotten justice, mercy, and faithfulness. That’s a classic speck-and-log situation.

We must beware of similar problems. Yes, those bad people in the bad denominations aren’t serving God according to His word, but what about us? Do we condemn them while reveling in some secret sin? Do we condemn them while our hearts are filled with resentment and bitterness toward a brother? Just because they’re wrong doesn’t mean we’re right, and we need to address our own problems before we tackle theirs.

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