

To Judge or Not to Judge

Matthew 7: 1-5 NRSV

Question: When is the time to judge? The Bible tells us not to judge, yet people – even Jesus – are judging all the time (like the moneychangers in the temple). How do we find the right balance?

Don't judge anyone else so that you won't be judged yourself! That's pretty strong and pretty clear -- just don't do it. But how is true is that? Aren't there times when you have to judge? As the question for today says, judging is often necessary and even beneficial. One image of God is as judge. Jesus judged. He even condemned the money changers in the temple and cursed the fig tree. John the Baptist surely judged – calling people a viper's brood!

So, to judge or not to judge may not be the primary question. We need to ask, "What does the Bible mean by "don't judge?" When is it appropriate to judge and when not? How should we judge and why can it be very important to judge?"

What does Jesus mean when he says, "don't judge [because] with the judgment you make you will be judged," and "the measure you give will be the measure you get?" There is a very practical danger in judging others. We run the very real risk of receiving the same judgment back at us. For example, have you ever been a member of a committee or board? Somebody suggests a new idea or a new course of action and everyone waits to see if the chair or president agrees or disagrees. We are reluctant to criticize the ideas or actions of another if we think our own ideas will be criticized in return.

This is a real problem in important areas of our lives. So, should we collude with each other not to be honest and not to hold each other accountable? Clearly not! Critical judgment is vital at work, school, home, and in our primary relationships. Reluctance to speak honestly for fear of being criticized ourselves means that honest and ultimately helpful feedback is missed. We don't hear what we need to help us grow and improve. The truth is not always easy to hear, but it's vital to know.

Jesus is not talking about important critical judgment when he says, "Do not judge so that you may not be judged. He tells a brief little story to make clear what he means. It's actually a pretty funny story. There are two guys. One becomes fixated on a tiny speck of sawdust in the other guy's eye. He acts as though he has an obsessive compulsive disorder. The speck is really small – a lot smaller than a piece of any eyelash stuck there. Most people would probably never notice it. So, the first guy is working hard to get the second guy to clean out his eye from this tiny speck of sawdust. What's funny is that he's doing it with a log stuck in his own eye! It's really a silly picture if you think about it. The first seems to be unaware that he has a log – the size of a tree -- hanging out of his eye.

Jesus is probably not talking about most people in this story. He appears to be criticizing his favorite targets, the judging religious leaders of his day. He judges them for being such hypocrites. They were always after people to be more religious – always criticizing and judging people for not being more righteous and moral, for failing to keep the smallest specks of the Law. At the same time, these religious leaders were participating in and profiting from a system that oppressed people – widows and orphans – a system that contributed to people losing their land. In addition, they were always telling the weak and powerless people that God rejected them. They were insisting that people clean the specks of sawdust out of their eyes while ignoring the logs in their own.

Judging is not optional in life. It is inevitable. What matters is what you do after the judgment – how you treat people once you’ve arrive at a judgment. Such judgments are destructive they have the effect of writing people off, of breaking relationship, and of working against spiritual growth. Certainly not all forms of judging are bad or to be avoided. Wisdom is a trait much to be desired and it consists of the ability to discern – to judge. Biblical faith itself requires judgment – an ability to look at one’s self honestly and choose one’s actions – to choose to believe God’s nature and work in the world.

To judge or not to judge – maybe that is the question! When is it right to judge and when is it wrong? It is right to be a shrewd judge yet wrong to be judgmental. To practice discrimination is bad, but to be discriminating is good.

When is it appropriate to judge? It is essential to judge when an egregious evil is happening such as when Jesus confronted the moneychangers and religious leaders. You and I have the responsibility to make that judgment call – to speak out, act, and take the consequences. Jesus did.

It’s appropriate to judge when you have the responsibility to pass judgment such as in a court of law. There are times when verdicts are needed and a sentence of judgment has to be passed or exoneration granted. It is not appropriate to judge another just because you have power. Having power certainly does not automatically make your judgment correct. A wise person judges with humility. It is not appropriate to be judgmental because someone disagrees with you. Judging and power are a dangerous combination.

How are we to judge? Judgments tend to fix event in time. A verdict is rendered and punishment or reward are handed down. This is as true outside a court of law as in one. Though the legal system usually requires the opportunity for appeal, our personal, family, and professional relationships don’t always offer that option. Sadly, religion is famous for promoting a final judgment, fixing sentences for an eternity in heaven or hell with no appeal. I really question that type of judgment and how we tend to impute that to God. Our judgments should reflect God’s way of judgment. My experience is that God’s judgments lead to redemption, hope of reconciliation, growth, and new life. I invite you to consider that God calls us to exercise judgment that encourages more discussion, promotes changes, and leaves room for growth.

Quite often, judgments go something like this: “I’m right and you’re wrong” or “You’re right and I’m wrong.” My experience is that most of the truth we experience in our lives is more complicated. It is a *thick* truth, multi-faceted, and full of contradictions and mystery. It is much easier to stake your claim to a narrow truth and then challenge others to accept it. You can then threaten to reject them if they don’t. Or you can settle for a truth that is so generalized as to be meaningless.

We live in a world of almost opulent variety and incredible diversity. If the world reflects God, then a thick understanding of truth that recognizes and embraces truth that includes conflicting perspectives is consistent with creation and its creator.

I invite you to exercise some judgment now – to make a judgment call for your life. This congregation, Crossroads Church, tends to view life as a journey of faith. On that journey, we embrace a *thick* understanding of truth – a truth that is reflected in the journey of each person and in our communal journey. If you’re new to Crossroads and if our life journey seems to have integrity for you, I invite you to come deeper into the life of this community. [If you’re reading this on our website, sign up for E-notes from Jack to get a better flavor of Crossroads.] Explore what your journey can be like as part of our journey together.

If Crossroads is your home, I invite you to consider deepening your commitment of time, talent, and treasure. Become involved in a small group or work group. Invite a friend or neighbor, someone you care about, to participate in this community. Can you see yourself walking the journey of life with people trying to live supporting each other and learning from each other? Can you see yourself as part of a community that seeks not to judge each other but to learn together how to discern the movement of God's Spirit in our lives?

“As we live within your Spirit, O God, together with people and with all creation, we thank you for the truth tellers in our lives – those who, with humility, tells us what we need to know to help us be truth tellers to each other and to this world in Jesus name. Amen.”