

Reserving Judgment

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Some time ago a Christian organization posted a meme on their Facebook page. Kermit the Frog is sipping tea to the words, “I didn’t know you had the authority to judge me. Is Jesus hiring?” While this is the classically pithy and snarky fare we find on Facebook these days, it certainly rubbed me the wrong way. People who are not Christians having an issue with being reminded of their failings, shameful actions or fearful conduct should not surprise us. However, the antinomian¹ currents of the world are sloshing their way into the Church, making even Christians respond with a “don’t you dare judge me” attitude. But what exactly do we mean by “judging”?



To Judge or Not to Judge?

The verb “to judge” has a range of meanings from “to form an opinion about through careful weighing of evidence and testing of premises” over “to determine and pronounce after inquiry or deliberation” to “to form an estimate or evaluation of; *especially*: to form a negative opinion about”.² The original Webster dictionary adds “To censure rashly; to pass severe sentence”³ as one of the meanings and it is specifically *this* meaning that is raised when people complain about “being judged” by another human being. The favorite verse to quote at this point is Matthew 7:1, “Do not judge, so that you won’t be judged.” That seems fairly straightforward. After all, Paul also writes, “Therefore, any one of you who judges is without excuse. For when you judge another, you condemn yourself, since you, the judge, do the same things.” (Rom. 2:1)⁴ So one human judging another human being is wrong, period. Right?

The issue with a blanket statement like this is that it ushers in a very dangerous result: it becomes impossible for a person to stand up and make any statement about infractions of the clear teachings of Scripture, for he or she most likely has sinned similarly at one point or another; and thus, a brother or sister is lost to the consequences of their misconduct, which they excuse because no one can “judge” them. This is extremely desirable to the antinomian crowd, because it completely defangs the moral teachings of the Bible. Being pleased with this state of affairs is to be expected from people who reject the absolutes of God’s teachings.⁵ While non-Christians will be judged by God for their conduct (and thus should be warned and encouraged to repent so they can escape His wrath), we Christians should not expect that they live according to Biblical principles; as a matter of fact, we should expect that they *do not* do so! What is against all expectation, though, is when people *within the Church* begin to espouse such statements so that they maintain their heathen lifestyles or follow the whim of their emotions while being certain that they will spend eternity with Christ regardless of their godless actions.

In addition to this, consider that the person who says “don’t judge,” has rushed to judgment themselves: for they are forming an estimate and evaluation, especially a negative one, of the motives of the other person for their statement about the offending words or ways. Perhaps the one “judging” was merely making an observation; or perhaps they are trying to point out the issue in order to reconcile their brother or sister to themselves, to God and to the Church.

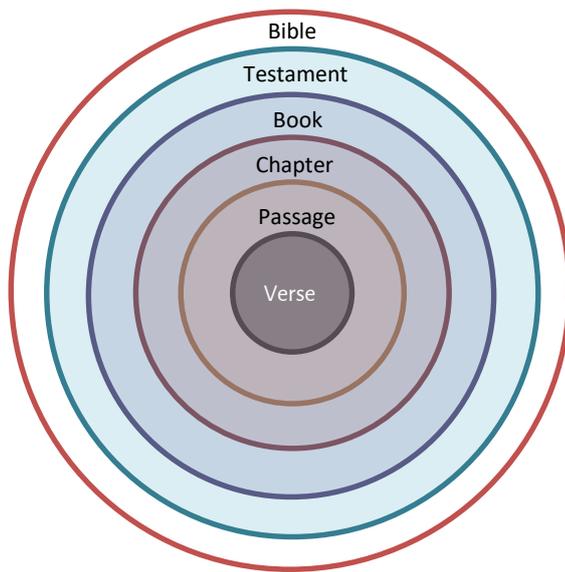
¹ Merriam-Webster defines “antinomian” as, “1: one who holds that under the gospel dispensation of grace the moral law is of no use or obligation because faith alone is necessary to salvation” and “2: one who rejects a socially established morality”. < <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/antinomian> > (accessed 2016-12-15). The second definition is the way “antinomian” is used in this essay.

² “Judge”, Merriam-Webster < <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/judge> > (accessed 2016-11-10).

³ Noah Webster, *Webster’s Dictionary of American English*, e-Sword, 1828.

⁴ See also Rom. 14:3-4,10-16; 1Co. 4:3-5 and Jas. 4:11-12

⁵ Postmodernism rejects absolutes entirely and demands “tolerance” of all positions, making it the chief proponent of a “do not judge me” attitude.



How context should color our understanding of a verse

Do not Judge?

So, what to do? This is where context comes to our rescue. Context can be described as a series of concentric circles of meaning, beginning with the logical passage surrounding the verse, then the chapter, book, Testament and Bible as a whole, each adding a new shade of understanding. If the issue is not solved by looking at the narrower context, the next wider circle is used to resolve it.

If we look at the context of Matthew 7:1 (and the parallel passage in Luke 6:37-38) we find that Jesus has quite a bit more to say about “judging”.

For with the judgment you use, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. (Mat. 7:2)

The point of the passage is that when we judge, we will be judged by the same standard we used. In other words, if I as a person with a drinking problem have something to say to my brother with a tobacco problem, I should be ready to accept the same sort of censure for my failing. The longer context makes it clear (as does Paul’s rebuke) that what Jesus takes

issue with here is the hypocrisy we often display when forming an estimate or evaluation of another person, not necessarily the evaluation or estimate itself. The point is then: judge yourself *first*, so that you may be able to see both yourself and the other person better and thus avoiding censuring them rashly or passing severe judgment.

As a matter of fact, only a few sentences later, Christ Himself says that “by their fruits you will know” false prophets (Mat. 7:20), making it clear that it is a person’s actions that allow us to come to a determination about their motives and the state of their heart (Mat. 7:15-20); and using our definition above, that is a form of “judgment”.

In his discussion about judging W. Schneider points out, “Human relationships are to be regulated by love, even extending to love of one’s enemies, but measured by the standard of God’s perfect righteousness, no man remains righteous in God’s sight.”⁶ And while he then goes on to argue that this is why no man should have the right to judge another, the grander context of Scripture makes it clear that lovingly approaching a brother or sister to restore him or her to fellowship with God and the Church is enjoined (see Mat. 18:15-20 and Jas. 2:12-13). A person who truly loves and cares for his or her brother or sister will do all they can to make sure that this sibling is walking in the light, including confronting them – “judging” them – with their sins.

Do Judge?

A careful study of Scripture also makes it abundantly clear that our Lord has invested the Church⁷ with the privilege and responsibility of forming an opinion through a careful weighing of evidence and testing of premises. Especially 1 Corinthians addresses this issue. In chapter 5, Paul eloquently argues for the Corinthian Christians to judge a brother who is blatantly violating God’s commands regarding morality in marriage. Then in chapter 6 he makes it clear that disputes between believers should be judged by other believers, not the secular courts. Finally, in chapter 11 of the same letter, he points out the following:

⁶ W. Schneider, “Judgment, Judge, Deliver, Judgment Seat,” ed. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther, and Hans Bietenhard, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 366.

⁷ Church with a capital “C” is defined here as the Church Universal, which encompasses all people who believe in Jesus Christ and *only* those. Despite also having non-believers in it, the local manifestation of the Church Universal is bound to the principles and regulations that our Lord and the Apostles set forward in Scripture. Anyone who claims to be a Christian is thus expected to submit to the teaching, judgment and guidance of the leadership of the local church (assuming, of course, said leadership is in line with clear biblical teaching).

But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. (1Co. 11:31-32 – ESV)

But what is the point of rendering these judgments that Paul talks about to the Corinthians? Their ultimate goal is found in our Lord's teaching on confrontation and reconciliation in Matthew 18:15-20. It comes down to this: "If your brother sins against you, go and rebuke him in private. If he listens to you, *you have won your brother*" (Mat. 18:15 – emphasis mine). James points out that "whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his life from death and cover a multitude of sins" (Jas. 5:20); and Paul advises us to do so "gently" (Gal. 6:1). *That means that the point of "judgment" in the Christian community is not to shame the sinner, rather it is to restore him or her to fellowship with God and the Church.* Yes, the exposure will result in shame, fear and guilt, but that is a good thing, for unless the sin is exposed and repented of, the Holy Spirit will not cover over the results. Just as a boil is lanced and the pus is allowed to drain to result in healing, so the sin must be exposed so it can be removed.

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Jesus is clear that this must first and foremost be done *privately* – brother-to-brother.⁸ That way the shame, fear and guilt are kept between the sinner and the one sinned against. Only if the sinner does not repent is the transgression made increasingly public. But the goal remains the same: the winning back and restoration of the fallen sibling. In this instance a clear judgment *must* be rendered so that reconciliation can happen. After all, are we not all forgiven by God? Are we not all called to be holy? Are we not all called to bear one another's burdens? And who but God can see the heart and render a true judgment about our motives? Only through open and clear communication can true judgement be rendered.

A Shield or a Mirror?

And thus we come to the primary problem that we face: A verse that is meant to be a mirror to forestall sin is being used as a shield to foment sin. "Don't judge me" becomes the battle cry of the Christian who craves to remain in his or her sinful habits. "You do the same thing" becomes an excuse to sully the name of Christ through godless behavior. "I'm not one to judge" becomes a way to brush off my love and responsibility toward my fellow Christian. For sin never ever only impacts the individual; it contaminates the entire community. This is true of the world and this is especially true of the Church.

Is Jesus hiring? The answer is yes, He has hired every Christian to be a kind and loving judge of his or her fellow Christian, so bringing accountability to the Church and protecting the holiness of one another. Therefore, let us judge rightly, justly, gently and mercifully and so bring righteousness and peace to a tainted and tormented Church, one suffering not from the wounds from without (for she could bear up under those) but rather from the rot within as her members tolerate sin and attitudes that mar her holiness and weaken her witness to the world.

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⁸ The inherent danger here is that we end up gossiping about the judgment rendered, regardless of whether that judgment is correct or not. This is probably one reason why Christ outlines the steps to restoration or rejection in such a detailed manner.