

## Can I Judge?

“You’re being judgmental!” “You’re judging me!” “Don’t judge another believer!” You can’t go too long in the Christian life without hearing these words. Judging is seen to be something sinful and off-limits for all believers. But is that entirely true? Is judging something I am to have no part in whatsoever? Is it an ungodly emotion that Christians should steer clear of? Well, we need to get the Bible’s Perspective on judging.

Firstly, judging has been given a black eye by Christians who want everything in black and white. It’s like a lot of other things in the Christian life, anger for example. Anger is not intrinsically evil; it is something God possesses in great amounts toward sin and the destruction of the beauty He intended. Selfish anger, however, is condemned as being sinful in the Word, while an anger at sin is encouraged in Ephesians 4:26. Or consider jealousy. God is Jealous over His people, and we are told to be jealous for His name and glory. But a jealousy that is envy and covetousness is sinful. Think of the notion of revenge. We think of revenge as an evil repugnant thing, but God says, Vengeance is mine. How can He claim as His own something intrinsically evil? In truth, a desire for justice and the punishment of one’s enemies is not ungodly, it is something that David longed for repeatedly under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit when he penned many of the Psalms. A selfish longing for the torment of those who hurt us purely to repay evil with evil though is wicked and shunned by God in Proverbs 24:17-18.

As much as we’d like to put everything into neat boxes and seal them off for our peace of mind, God calls us to work out the details of life with His Word as our guide and make sure we truly follow Christ, even in the seemingly difficult emotions of anger, revenge and so on. One of those issues is judging. Just like the examples given, there is a kind of judging in Scripture that is forbidden, and a kind that is actually encouraged. How do we know the difference?

Let’s look first at the kind of judging that is forbidden.

Matthew 7:1-2. Here is a clear instruction not to judge. This command is repeated in Luke 6:37.

Romans 2:1 speaks of the hypocrite passing sentence on another man. He is the man whom Jesus said has a log in his own eye, but wants to take the speck out of his brother’s eye. In Romans 14, we see the same thing coming up 3-4, 10. James 4:11-12 again condemns judging a brother.

The interesting thing in all these verses is that the Greek word for judgement is the same in all of them, making it easier for us to discern what God is saying. He has used the same word for judgement wherever He forbids us from exercising that kind of judgement.

This Greek word carries with it a number of ideas. It speaks of basically splitting people up in your mind into good or bad, worthy or unworthy. It is separating individuals into categories which you decide upon. It carries the idea of passing sentence on someone, deciding them to be good or evil. Really, it usurps the place of God and sets oneself up as the one deciding the state and future fate of another. It is

almost partial, developing a personal preference for one over another. This is the kind of judging God forbids.

Reading the context of all these verses tells us that this kind of judging is a proud, haughty kind of judgment. It decides, using illegitimate authority, that another is evil, or has impure motives or is in sin. Paul was saying to the Romans, how can you pass sentence on another believer for differing convictions? He serves another Person, not you, and he will individually answer to his master, as will you. Likewise James seems to be speaking about a kind of judging that is destructive in its nature, that serves as nothing more than criticism for the sake of criticism.

This kind of judging can be summed up like this: **deciding on the heart and state of another believer without Scripture to do so.**

This kind of judging is evil for two reasons.

- 1) It lacks real authority before God , and is like a kangaroo court in His eyes.
- 2) It carries all the signs of an impure heart

The reason why there is no authority behind this kind of judging is because all indications are that God is speaking about judging someone without Scriptural authority. It is effectively a judgement formed in our own mind outside the bounds of Scripture.

The authority used in this kind of judgment is purely subjective: it is a personal opinion, a product of human reasoning, a preference given to another or rejection of someone for reasons residing within the mind of the one passing judgement.

No matter how brilliant your mind may be, no matter how keen your sense is of people's motives, their personalities and so on, you still lack proper authority to make the kind of judgements we are talking about. To pass judgement on another person is to be done only by one who acts with Scripture's authority on the matter. To step outside of Scripture and then make a judgement is to lose all your authority in one fell swoop.

Have you ever had a playful argument with someone else on who was taller? Both of you kind of stand on tiptoes, stretching your neck, adamant that one of you is the taller. Ultimately, you need someone else to measure the two of you, because you can't accurately gauge your own height anyway. The same is true of a final judgement on another. The minute Scripture is no longer the basis for the judgement, you have stepped away from being an objective arbitrator to being the one person measuring themselves against the other. You don't know your own heart, and therefore cannot give entirely accurate judgements on others. Paul rebukes the one who does this in Romans 2.

Now just as revenge is something God has told us belongs to Him, because only He will fairly and effectively be able to exercise it, so with this kind of judgement. Paul explains this in I Cor 4:5. Paul says that truly fair judgment can only be done when all the facts are on the table, and only God will be able to take what is hidden and concealed and bring it out. Only God can effectively judge, and as Christ points out, only God has the authority to judge in this capacity.

This is His point in Matthew 7 and Luke 6. To take up this kind of judgement is to stand in the place of the blameless judge and pass sentence on another. That then

opens you up to scrutiny as to how blameless you are. With what measure you judge Matt 7:2.

Second, the fruit of this kind of judgment reveals that it comes from an impure heart. According to James, the reason we judge others in this way comes from a proud spirit. Despising others for no reason means we despise God's commands to prefer other above ourselves, thus despising His law and placing ourselves above it. As much as the judgmental one seems to have all the facts, they are being motivated by a heart that is in rebellion to God's authority. Its motives are impure. It desires self-exaltation, not by the biblical way of humility, but by making others seem lower, hoping then to make oneself seem higher.

Within the heart of the person doing this exists things that are sin, Ro 14:10.

Clearly the heart is not right. Why does one with a log try to take out a speck in the eye of another? Pride, self-righteousness, a meddling attitude discouraged in the book of Proverbs. This kind of judging, deciding on the state and heart of another without Scripture, is condemned by God.

But there is a second kind of judging that is not evil, but is in fact commanded in Scripture. Just like it can seem confusing to embrace righteous anger, but refuse sinful anger, so it can seem confusing to embrace righteous judgement and refuse ungodly judgement. People like the easy way out: "Oh, we're not supposed to judge" No, that's a dilution of Jesus' commands; it's a cop-out. The challenge to the growing believer is to be able to discern these differences and thus be complete and mature in Christlike character Hebrews 5:14.

We find the kind of judgement God expects us to give in- I Corinthians 2:15. Notice who is to do this judging, the mature believer 'he that is spiritual'. Notice what he is to judge "all things"! The believer is instructed to make a judgement about everything in life! That is what Paul means in I Thes 5:21, test everything, hold onto what is good. The mature, as we saw in Hebrews 5, are mature **because they are able to make such judgments**. Because of their frequent and obedient use of Scripture in everyday life, their discernment is growing, and they can make moral judgements about every situation. Paul says, "but he is judged of no man" i.e. the mature believer can make judgements but unbelievers and carnal Christians cannot understand him, and therefore pass an accurate judgement on him. He is under a totally different guide and authority, they are being led by the flesh. That is why the preceding verse speaks of how the unsaved man regards spiritual things as foolishness. The one with the authority to judge situations is the one with the right authority and the right attitude. Notice where the authority comes from (vv. 12-13). Scripture. The man who is being led by the Spirit is being led by the Word. He is saturated with it (Eph 5:18, Col 3:16). As a result, when he makes a moral distinction, he is acting on the explicit authority of the Word of God. It is not a personal preference made for selfish reasons, it is a judgement made on the basis of the Bible.

Paul calls for this kind of judging in I Cor 6, telling the Corinthians that they must grow up and do some judging for themselves. The Corinthians were busy taking each other to court. Paul says, you are saints with the Spirit of God in you. You therefore have the ability to make righteous judgements, why on earth aren't you doing it? Later he will instruct them regarding the use of spiritual gifts, saying 'when the prophets speak, let it be two or three' and let the others judge.

This kind of judging uses slightly different Greek words to the one used in Matthew by Jesus, and they carry the idea of discernment: to make the necessary distinctions. These distinctions between truth and error, holiness and sin, flesh and Spirit, godliness and worldliness are seen by the one who is regularly exposed to God's Word. He is spiritual, mature, and his authority is not a subjective standard of self, but the objective standard of the Word.

God calls for this kind of judging. He wants His people to be able to see the difference between the shepherd and the hireling, between the real and the counterfeit. And believers who refuse to do this kind of judging are not going to be honoured by God, for they have chosen to be slothful in this area. They have chosen to be spiritual ostriches, with their heads in the sand, not wanting to make sharp distinctions between good teachers and false prophets, between good churches and bad, between godly believers and divisive ones. They say, "We mustn't judge" and hope that this positive attitude will make the problem go away. They are like the false prophets in the nation Israel who cried 'Peace, peace' when there was no peace.

How does this judging differ from the ungodly judging?

Firstly, the authority is clearly Scriptural. These judgements are not made out of human reasoning or personal preferences, but because the Bible clearly states it. If a man preaches false doctrine, and one says so, the cry is 'You're being judgemental'. The reply ought to be, 'Yes, I'm judging all things, not on my own criteria, but on the Bible. The Bible has judged this man's doctrine and he has failed.' As Jesus said to the unbelievers, 'I will not judge you, the words I have spoken to you will be your judge.' The one who makes this kind of judgement is resting completely in God; he is not stepping out in his own wisdom, the judgement is made on the basis of an unmistakeable precept in the Bible which has been violated.

Secondly, the attitude is clearly Christlike. The one who does this kind of judging continually empties his heart of self-will, or of a desire to exalt self by pulling another down. This judgement is extremely cautious with its words, it will follow the advice of Proverbs to let your words be few. Ultimately, it is driven by the desire to glorify God, and the desire to love our neighbour. Galatians 6 tells us of those who have seen a believer fall. They have made that judgment. What are they to do and in what spirit 6:1. The goal should first be restoration before separation. The Bible gives steps to take when one refuses godly rebukes. Ultimately, all are done for the help of our neighbour, and the good of the Body of Christ. Remember, loving someone often involves things that look like hate or meanness, Proverbs 27:5, wounds. But these come as a result of godly judgement, discerning what is wrong.

Consider that when Jesus said in Matthew we must take the log out of our own eyes, he added verse 5. Wanting to take the speck out of our brother's eye is a good thing: godly judging is not wrong. Doing so from a position where we are blinded to our own sin -- that's ungodly judging. Clear out the problem in your own life and then perform surgery on your brother. Jesus did not say we must ignore the speck in our brother's eye, rather, we must be blameless when we take his out.

Some say we can't judge another's motives. But that's exactly what the apostles did repeatedly when describing false prophets. Peter tells us their motive is gain, Jude tells us, Paul tells us what was in their hearts. They had Scriptural authority to judge

these men, from the O.T. and from the Holy Spirit that inspired them. Likewise, the believer can exercise judgement regarding men like this amongst us today using the Bible. The spiritual are to judge all things, from a place of humility, not seeking to exalt and be puffed up or even out of a sick desire to criticise others. It is done in the fear of God, seeking to glorify Him by making moral distinctions in all situations.

Jesus seems to give the balance in John 7:24. Judgement according to appearance is a fleshly judgement. It uses only what our human wisdom can give us. It is also done with human motives and thus is hypocritical and tainted. Righteous judgement is performed by one saturated with the Word, who under the teaching and guidance of the Holy Spirit discerns between good and evil, truth and error, and makes the correct decisions in response. Since this judgement is spiritual/ righteous, it is controlled by the Holy Spirit, and thus the spirit in which it is done is Christlike. Others may criticise this, others may regard it as unloving, as they did of Jesus, but as it is done under the control of the Spirit, it constitutes obedience to God and therefore brings glory to Him.