

Judge Righteous Judgement

Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. 12 There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another? (Jam 4:11-12)

I decided to Google the words, “Don't Judge Me!” to see what would come up. Among the 7 million hits that Google listed, I found there is a song by that title, T-shirts with various versions of “Don't Judge, You Don't Know My Life” or “Don't Judge Me, You Don't Know Me” and of course hundreds of thousands of graphics and memes that are no doubt flooded through social media every day, “Don't Judge, Just Love”, or “Don't judge me because I sin differently to you.” Someone has said that the world's most popular Bible verse at the moment is Matthew 7:1, “Judge not, lest you be judged.”

We live in a culture which claims that judging is the highest and worst sin, and all acts of judging are acts of hypocrisy. Supposedly only self-righteous people filled with hate judge, humble loving people never judge.

At the same time, the very same culture is absolutely in love with judging. There have never been more reality TV shows in which people are judged, more beauty contests in which people are judged, more talent shows in which people are judged, more situations in which people are judged either by a panel or by viewers. And people love it. Not only so, but the Internet thrives on judgement: people rate books, movies, hotels, places, food, service, restaurants, products, performances, albums or just about anything else with 1 star, 2 stars, 5 stars, thumbs up, thumbs down, user reviews, user comments. People judge each other's Facebook posts with likes and shares. People are encouraged to judge, though they use the word 'rate' more often. So much so, that people go on the web to look at the combined judgements of others to determine whether they should buy something or not.

No, people don't hate judging. They hate being the recipients of negative judgements, the targets of judgements that find fault with them. They hate having their sin called out as sin, or being told that they are morally flawed and fallen. In other words, they claim judgement is evil, but it is only evil when it doesn't go their way.

But it's in this atmosphere of hypocrisy about judgement, muddled thinking about judgement, and confusion about judgement that we Christians must live. I expect almost every Christian in this room has had some experience with someone, either claiming to be a believer or a non-believer, telling you at some point, “Don't judge” “It's wrong to judge” “You're being judgemental”. And that has some sting to it, because it is shorthand for, “You're being mean”, and as Christians we are not to be cruel, unkind or mean-spirited.

And then, I suppose, falling off the other side of the horse is the backlash, the people who are so tired of this phoney 'judgement is wrong' stuff that they have to make a point by becoming abrasive, nasty, cutting, and cruel in their supposed prosecution of righteousness. Reacting to sentimentality, they go to the other extreme of brutality, and become the very caricature that the sentimentalists call judgemental.

So what are we to do? How do we navigate all this confusion about judgement?

James has a lot of the answer for us, because in these two verses, James is going to make it clear what kind of judgement is sinful in God's sight. James will tell us here what kind of judgement is actually forbidden to Christians, not simply disliked by our neighbours, or inconvenient to sinners

who love their sin. So by a process of elimination, we can then know what kind of judgement is forbidden to us, and what kinds of judgement are permitted.

I. Proud Judging Forbidden

Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother

Here is the command – don't speak evil of one another, which literally means, do not speak against each other. Do not slander one another. Do not destroy another's reputation, by speaking against them. Right after that James puts these two thoughts side by side – speaking evil of a brother and judging a brother. So here James is clearing up what kind of judgement is sinful.

The judgement which is forbidden is very close to, if not identical with, slander, bearing false witness. This is when you speak about someone, almost always in his or her absence, construing and interpreting actions in the worst possible light, so as to deliberately paint the person as evil. What makes this judgement sinful is its desire. The problem is not that the judgement is negative, or that the judgement is critical, or that the judgement is unflattering. What makes this kind of judgement wrong is that it is malicious. It desires to destroy. The motive is not truth, but malice.

In fact, if we are to simply step back and consider the context, what has James been talking about? He just finished his appeal for us to humble ourselves, and submit to God, and repent of pride. The pride and self-deception that fills our relationships with conflict and misery. The kind of judging that is rooted in a worldly love of self becomes slanderous judgement, because like we saw in chapter 4, when in the grip of pride, desires become needs, needs become demands and demands become wars. When self is trying to win and destroy, it will think evil of another, and speak evil of another.

In other words, the problem is not the act of judging. The problem is the kind of judging. Just as there is a kind of love that is pure and ordinate, and a kind of love that is impure and inordinate, just as there is a kind of joy that is right and ordinate, and a kind of joy that is evil and inordinate, so there is a kind of judging that is right and ordinate, and a kind that is evil and inordinate.

So what kind of judgement is good? To contrast this with the kind of judgement God forbids, let me show you three kinds of judgement that we must do. Here is a mini-theology of judgement from the Scriptures.

On the first and simplest level, there is the judgement of simply reasoning. You and I do this all the time. We weigh up evidence in front of us, and we make a judgement. We judge if we have time to make it before oncoming traffic. We judge if the potatoes are properly cooked. We judge if the budget will balance. The Bible even uses this word when talking about Paul simply deciding or determining to sail past Ephesus in Acts 20:16. If you couldn't make these judgements, you could not survive in life.

On the second and higher level, we are supposed to make value judgements. That is, we are to judge certain things, actions, attitudes, and even people to be good or evil, to be ugly or beautiful, to be true or false. That's a value judgement. The Bible commends and even commands this kind of judgement. Jesus said to the Pharisees, "*Yes, and why, even of yourselves, do you not judge what is right?*" (Luk 12:57). Paul calls on his readers in 1 Corinthians 11 to judge whether something an immodest woman is appropriate in worship. In fact, the word for discernment in Greek is two words, *dia* (through), and *krisis* (judgement). Hebrews 5:14 tells us that solid theology is digestible to those who have grown in judgement, who have learned to judge between good and evil, between

appropriate and inappropriate.

A Christian should be continually weighing things for their meaning, for their beauty, for their goodness. That's why Paul prays in Philippians 1:9-11 for his readers to grow in clearer and better value judgements: *And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, (Phi 1:9-10)*

In fact, if you do not do value judgements, you are being disobedient. According to Philippians 4:8 God expects us to love what is true, noble, just, pure, beautiful, reputable, virtuous and praiseworthy, and unless you are judging your music, and your DVDs, and your magazines, and your conversations, and clothing, and your spending, and your associations, and your leisure time by that standard, you are not acting as an obedient Christian. We must judge. Judgement is so crucial to the life of a believer, 1 Thessalonians 5:21 says, "Test all things; hold fast what is good." The only way you can love what God loves and hate what God hates is if you are constantly making value judgements.

By the way, everyone does this. Even the person who tells you, "Don't judge" is making a value judgement about judging. She is saying judging is bad. Not judging is good. And so she herself has made a judgement. It just so happens that her standard of what is good is something like, "Good people leave me alone and condone everything I do. Bad people interfere with me." That's her standard of good, and she judges you by it. We can't help making value judgements. It is incoherent and contradictory to say "Judging is bad". It's like saying "No statement is true." As long as you are human, and think some things are good, and desirable, and lovely, you will make value judgements. It's just what your standard will be for those judgements.

Now the basis for those judgements has to be just, it has to be God's standard. *"Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment."* (Joh 7:24) And how we do that is not something we can explore right now. But it is enough to say that all of life should be judged by you for its value – its moral value – if it is good and pleasing to God, or not.

The third kind of judgement we are called on to make is to judge doctrine and behaviour as Christian or non-Christian. This is how we identify false teachers, and it is how we identify false brethren. We read of this in 1 Corinthians 5 and 6, where Paul commands the church to judge someone living in flagrant, public, scandalous sin to be living like an unbeliever. Paul commands the believers to church discipline the person, judging by his actions that he is not a believer. Matthew 18 also describes this process of a church coming to a corporate judgement that a person is guilty of unrepentant, ungodly action. Romans 16:17 tells us to *note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them*, while Titus 3:10 tells us to *Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition*. The whole book of 1 John describes the doctrine and duty of true believers, and tells us that people who habitually teach the opposite or live the opposite are not believers. We are to evaluate teaching as agreeing with the Gospel or not. Paul called certain teachers accursed, who were teaching another Gospel. Paul said Alexander and Hymenaeus had shipwrecked the Gospel. Peter and Jude warn us about false teachers who are denying the Lord who bought them.

Now this is not a judgement we are to make quickly, or lightly. In fact, we should not make it on our own. This judgement has to take place among witnesses, to make sure that it is not skewed by sinful personal agendas. It should take place where mature believers compare Scripture with Scripture. But we do have to make this kind of judgement. In fact, Paul tells us to make this judgement about ourselves at every Lord's Supper. *31 For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. (1Co 11:31)*

Now these are the three kinds of judging we always do, and always must do. We must make rational decisions, we must make value judgements, and we must judge doctrine and behaviour to be Christian or non-Christian by those who claim the title.

So then, this brings us back to the kind of judging that James is forbidding. James does not tell us to avoid drawing conclusions about each other. He does not tell us to make no value judgements on the actions, and thoughts and behavior, and even motives of other Christians. He does not tell us to stop judging those who claim to be Christians by the standard of Christian doctrine and practice.

He says, do not slander one another with malicious intent. Do not, from a heart of pride, malign another Christian. Do not say what is false, and act as if it is true, do not exaggerate, or leave out details or tell half-truth, or otherwise misrepresent another for your own advantage. That's what 1 Peter 2:1 calls evil speaking. It's what 1 Timothy 3:11, and 2 Timothy 3:3 and Titus 2:3 calls slander.

Now, to make the difference clearer between the humble judgement that we must do, and the proud judgment that we must not do, James explains what is going on when we judge proudly.

II. Proud Judging Explained

He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.

What does James mean here? James says, proud judging is an act of arrogance. When you judge proudly, you step away from being the plaintive or the defendant, equal before God's Word, and you put on the black robe, take the gavel, and pretend to be above and over God's Word. Proud judging is easily distinguished from humble judging because it does not submit to a higher Judge or a higher law.

How so?

First, proud judging judges from a place of self-righteousness. You are not a fellow-sinner, submitting to the law, you are someone who is so above it that you can perfectly judge those who are under it. This is really what Jesus meant when He said these oft-quoted words. Because pay attention to what comes after them.

"Judge not, that you be not judged. 2 "For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. 3 "And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? 4 "Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? 5 "Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Mat 7:1-5)

Jesus does not forbid taking the speck out of your brother's eye. He forbids acting as if you do not have a plank in your eye. Proud judgement is self-righteous. It acts as if it speaks not as a fellow-sinner, but as the sinless judge.

Rom 2:1 *Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.*

Humble judgement begins with self-judgment. *Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. (Gal 6:1).* I will not slander another, because humility is not interested in destroying another to make

myself look better. I know my faults, and judge with that attitude.

Second, proud judgement make its own judgements the standard of righteousness. You cast aside God's Word, and make your preferences, or even your convoluted and twisted interpretation of God's Word the standard. This is what is going on in Romans 14, where Paul is dealing with conflict in the Roman church over different convictions over the observance of days, and the eating of foods. Paul points out that in what we call *adiaphora*, matters indifferent, it is possible for believers to have opposite convictions and both please the Lord.

Rom 14:3 *Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him.* **Rom 14:4** *Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.*

Rom 14:10-12 *But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.* **Rom 14:4** *Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.*

Rom 14:13 *Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way.*

Proud judgement turns what is one legitimate application of God's Word into the only application of God's Word. My standard is the only standard, I stand above God's actual Word, and judge you by my standard. But humility says, if my brother or sister has biblical warrant for that action, I cannot condemn them. I can disagree, I can even disapprove, but I will not slander and smear.

Third, proud judgement claims to know more than it really does. When I am submitted to God's Word, I use it as the standard, and make reasonable judgements based on what is being done. Yes, I can judge action, and even intention. But I still submit my judgement to the omniscience of God.

1Co 4:5 *Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God.* I still hold my judgement with the humility that says, I don't know everything.

Now lots of Christians are quick to say, "we can't judge motives." But that's actually impossible. We judge motives all the time, based on what evidence we have. If someone trips on a cord and spills the water glass on the pulpit on me, but is all apologetic, when I say, "No problem at all," I am judging motives. When a disgruntled former member appears at the back of the church during a sermon, marches down the front with a furious look, and grabs the glass of water, I'm going to duck. I'm judging motives, because it's part of judging what someone is doing and the meaning of what they are doing. When we try to understand what someone is trying to accomplish we judge motives. This is not forbidden.

Now I agree that we should always begin by putting the most charitable interpretation of our fellow Christian's actions. We are forbidden from judging evil motives without adequate justification for thinking so. But we can judge motives with enough warrant to do so. Peter certainly thought he had justification for judging Simon the sorcerer's motives: "Repent therefore of this your wickedness and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you, for I perceive that you are in the gall of bitterness and you are in the bond of iniquity." John felt he had enough justification interpret Diotrephes' motives in 3 John, when he said, "I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us." (3 Jo 1:9) Paul said of Elymas the sorcerer: "O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord? (Act 13:10). Jude said of the motives of false teachers, "These are grumblers, complainers, walking according to their own lusts; and they mouth great swelling words, flattering people to gain advantage. (Jud 1:16). We can judge motives, we do judge motives, it's just we should do so humbly and charitably.

I can interpret actions, attempt to interpret motives, and make a judgement. But in the end, I have

to hold that judgement with the certainty it merits. I do not know everything. I do not know everything internal and external. Pride will simply assume evil, be cynical, impute evil motives without warrant. Humility will be careful and sober about what it does know.

Fourth, proud judgement claims to have the final verdict on another. It claims not the judgement of a fellow pilgrim, but the perspective and right to condemn. That leads us into James statement in verse 12.

There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?

In proud judgement, we are no longer bringing our evaluations to a higher evaluation, bringing our judgements to a greater Judge. We are not submitted to His judgements about others, which are found in His Word. When we are proud, we have malicious intent, and want to be Judge, Jury and Executioner. We ascend to that place of Judge, claiming special knowledge, unbiased insight, blameless intentions. From that place, the judgement is always the same: you are wrong, and I am right. You have sinned and I have not. You are guilty and I am innocent. You should be destroyed and I should be saved. This is exempting myself from God's Word, selfishly cast them in role of evildoer while I sit in the role of blameless, above-the-law judge.

The humble man knows his own judgement is an act of interpretation. He knows others may get it wrong about him as often as he gets it wrong about them. He makes his judgements as best he can, but he knows the final judgement rests with God. He judges humbly, charitably, truthfully, but leaves the final saving or destroying to God. He does not exact punishment in the form of slander, gossip, innuendo, destructive talk. If God is going to punish, then I don't need to punish them in my thoughts or with my words.

Don't judge from a place of self-righteousness – it almost always leads to slander. Don't judge from exalting your own standards above God's Word – it leads to slander and false witness. Don't judge claiming to know more than you do – it leads to exaggeration, distortion and false witness. Don't judge claiming to know what the final outcome will be – it leads to overconfident false witness.

Now I'll tell you one of the easiest ways to spot proud judging in yourself or in another. C.S. Lewis once said that some people scratch like a cat, but bleed at a touch. A proud person will judge you by his proud standard, but demand you judge him humbly, charitably and kindly. When he slanders and speaks evil, he is simply reporting facts, but when you judge his actions as evil with good warrant, you are slandering and bearing false witness, and assassinating his character. The way such people do it is by a game of equivocation. That is they change the definition of a term to suit their purposes. When they are on the offense – judgement means objective, clear, factual gathering up of evidence, no bias, sheer uninterpreted facts. But when you do it to them, suddenly it is laden down with sinister subjective motives, biased twistings and evil intent.

Here's how we confront the self-deception in all of us. We are all to judge. All of us are subjects, making judgements, meaning our judgements are subjective. But our subjective judgements can be more or less true, if they are humbly submitted to God. If I acknowledge God's final right to judge, God's omniscience, God's righteousness, God's fairness, and I acknowledge my partiality, my twistedness, my limited knowledge, my faulty reasoning, my emotionalism, I'm in a humble place. I say, God, "I have to judge: I have to judge actions, words, deeds, even motives. But I want to do it with your Word above me, your Word as the standard, your Spirit as my guide, your church as my multitude of counsel. Help me to judge with the knowledge I do have, with your Word as the standard, acknowledging my sinfulness, and giving to You the ultimate place of judging." That kind of judgement will not speak evil of others, or fall into the trap of slander.