

Call to Obedience #226
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“He that is without sin....”

To Judge or Not to Judge

By Reimar Schultze

“Judge not, that ye be not judged” (Ma.7:1).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Judge not that ye be not judged;” yet, on the other hand, he also said, “Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment” (Jn. 7:24). And of course, this seeming contradiction gets us right into the question of when to judge and when not to; what to judge and what not to.

Let us begin with some of the older definitions of judging. Going to the Hebrew, judging means, first of all, “to rule” and then “to judge.” That is to say that a man cannot rule unless he also judges. Such it was with Moses who ruled by judging, as also did the judges of the Old Testament.

The Greek word krino, to judge, relates to the root of the Latin word cerno, meaning to sunder, or to part, or to sift. Judging, then, always involves a careful separation of the good from the evil, of the right from the wrong.

So, it is inevitable that we must have judges, and that there is a place for judging. This has always been part of the rule of God under the Old Testament and the New Testament covenants. Therefore, Paul admonishes the Christians not to use the secular legal system to settle their differences but rather to make the church a court of law by saying:

“Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? And if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? How much more things that pertain to this life?... I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? No, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren?” (1 Co. 6:1-3,5).

Now, let us consider more specifically how judging fits into the Christian life.

I. We All Are to Judge, to Distinguish Good from Evil.

I mention this first because this is the foundation of all Christian judgment. We, for example, must judge what is wheat and what is chaff, what is light and what is darkness, what will help and what will hinder, and who to have fellowship with and who to avoid (2 Th. 3:6).

We do this judging by the Word of God, by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, or by the gift of discernment, which is a special gift for judging righteous judgment. This kind of universal judging primarily relates how we are to react to people and circumstances.

Then there is another kind of judging that goes beyond our own good. It is the judging of others unto correction. We must realize that we cannot correct anyone until we have first made a judgment on what needs to be corrected.

II. We Are Entitled to Judge Others in a Teacher/Student Relationship —If We Are the Teacher.

The most basic teacher/student relationship is that between a parent and a child. A parent must judge the child's behavior, for without judging such behavior, the parent cannot rule his house successfully. Indeed, a parent is to apply the law of God to the child and, if necessary, even with the rod of correction (Pr. 22:15). A parent is God's proxy lawgiver in the home.

Again, remember, the ruling and the judging go together. One cannot rule without judging, and one cannot be a rightful judge unless appointed to that office.

Another teacher/student relationship is that of the classroom, all the way from grammar school through university training. The teacher has a license to judge. And so it is also true of the workplace where no employer can successfully operate a business without dealing with the faults and weaknesses of his employees.

Finally, there is the pastor/parishioner relationship. This is also a teacher/student relationship. The pastor is God's appointed ruler, and he is admonished to "reprove and rebuke" for the perfecting of the saints (2 Ti. 4:2; 3:16-17; He. 13:7).

III. We Are Entitled to Judge Others When We Are in a Teacher/Teacher Relationship.

When there is a transfer of a student from one teacher to another, for example, it is appropriate for the old teacher to relate to the new one the weaknesses and the strengths of that student. This is done in the school system, and it is done in the workplace by "character references" which include past job performance and summaries of the person's strengths and weaknesses. And it also ought to be done when a parishioner moves from one parish to another. In this case, it is wise for the new pastor or church to ask for references from the former pastor before placing the new members in leadership. When this is not done, pastors may put new members into positions of leadership for which they are not qualified. The consequences could be serious.

Other than when you are in a teacher/student relationship or a teacher/teacher relationship, there is only one more position from which you as a Christian can judge another Christian, and that is from the point of Christian perfection.

IV. We May Judge and Correct Others if We Have Obtained Moral Perfection.

This is the message of Jesus' "judgment passage" in his Sermon on the Mount (Ma. 7:1-5).

Although this passage begins with "Judge not...", it ends by saying that once you have cleaned up your house, then you may help your brother to clean up his. If we judge other Christians, pointing out their sins, weaknesses, and faults, when we still have our own, we are hypocrites. However, if we judge fellow believers when we are in a state of moral perfection, then we are as "little saviors." In Jesus' words, it reads like this, "Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye" (v. 5).

Notice, again, the ultimate end of righteous judgment and of this judgment passage is moral perfection. Judging other Christians with sin and bad attitudes in our own lives, blinds us from making righteous judgments. If we go about judging under those circumstances, we do no better than a blind man doing cataract surgery on another person's eye. The more a saint is broken and the longer he has walked with God, the more reluctant he will ever be to deal with the faults of others, knowing that he also must appear before the judgment seat of Christ.

Now, let us see how Jesus judged.

The Morally Perfect Cast Out the Mote in the Brother's Eye with Love, Compassion, and Hope.

When the adulterous woman was caught in the act of adultery, there was only one clear Old Testament biblical answer to her misdeed: death by stoning. Notice that the penalty was given to Moses by God. The Pharisees tried to get Jesus to disagree with God, his Father. They thought they had Jesus in a corner.

But Jesus is not to be put into a corner. He came not to destroy the law but to fulfill the law. Therefore, he said to the Pharisees: you caught her, and you stone her--provided, of course, you don't have a beam or mote in your own eye! If you don't, go ahead and do it. "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (Jn. 8:7).

Jesus permitted and consented to the stoning of this woman provided the Pharisees hearts were pure. Well, they were not, and so they all left off judging and condemning and finding fault with this woman, at least for the moment. Indeed, they all found themselves to be hypocrites.

Now, if we are not truly holy, without sin, then should we not also drop our stones and just walk away, and let those who have no sin or who are in a leadership position deal with the problem?

Jesus, as the only one without sin, was left alone with the woman. And what, my friend, did he do? He, the only one who had the right to judge, to condemn, to find fault, and to criticize, leaned on compassion, love, and forgiveness; and in that context, he removed the beam from her eye by saying to her, "...go, and sin no more" (v. 11).

Summing it all up: all of us are called to judge between right and wrong, holy and unholy, so we can keep ourselves unspotted. Some of us are placed in a position of judging in reference to ruling or governing. If we are in that position, we must carefully (with discretion) fulfill our calling. If we are not called to such a position of governing by divine right, the judging of other Christians should only be from a pure heart without a speck in our own eye, without a stone in our hand, and with great restraint and caution.

In the judgment passage, "Judge not..." are the first words, but, lest we make "Judge not..." the Eleventh Commandment, Jesus ends this passage with our need to be perfect so that we can, with righteous judgment, help others toward perfection.

The next time you are about to judge, find fault, or criticize, please think about all these things.