

Question: How can we make any kind of statements about right and wrong without disobeying the command of Jesus to "judge not?"

While there is a kind of judging that is inappropriate, some judging is necessarily involved in distinguishing between good and evil. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus did say, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" (Matthew 7:1-5). He also added: "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs" (Matthew 7:6); and "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. . . A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit" (Matthew 7:15-20). One cannot identify the kind of people represented by the dogs, pigs, wolves and bad or good fruit without passing judgment. We need to understand when judging is appropriate and when it is inappropriate.

One form of inappropriate judgment is judgment based on partial and/or inaccurate information. We humans have a tendency to jump to conclusions without taking the time and effort needed to make sure our information is not based on gossip or the false judgment of someone else. Also, there are some things beyond the ability of any human being to know; therefore, we should leave judgment of motives, inner thoughts and intentions of others to God who alone sees what is in a person. Jesus told his critics, "Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment" (John 7:24).

Another form of inappropriate judging is passing judgment on someone's eternal destiny. "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge," wrote James, "the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?" (James 4:12). One of the apostles stated: "Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts" (1 Corinthians 4:5). To pass eternal judgment upon someone is to presume upon God's role. No human has that authority.

However, judgment which simply states that certain behaviors or actions are sinful is not inappropriate. For example, God has clearly told us: "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity

and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21). Although we may be accused of judging improperly when pointing out these things, we must also remember that “Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins” (James 5:20).

But even when a judgment of sin is appropriate, it should always be tempered with mercy. Jesus said: “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him” (John 3:17 NAS). Luke 6:37 says: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” When we must declare something a person does as sin, we should also make it clear that our Lord and his people are eager to forgive. Jesus would urge us to obey the words of his brother, James: “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!” (James 2:12-13).

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