

"WHO AM I TO JUDGE?"

Matthew 7:1 "Do not judge so that you will not be judged". [NASB]

This famous warning from the Lord's Sermon on the Mount is often misconstrued — by means of a dose of feigned piety — in order to accept, shelter and accommodate sin by announcing: "Who am I to judge?" or by threatening: "Who are you to judge?" — since, by recognizing sin, one might be accused of judging it as sin and also of judging the one who commits it, as a sinner.

However, one should not neglect the instruction of the Apostle Paul to the church at Corinth:

1 Corinthians 2:15a *But he who is spiritual judges all things, [NKJV]*

At first reading, the juxtaposition of the two passages may seem confusing.

However, we know that God never fosters confusion:

1 Corinthians 14:33a *For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. [ESV]*

We should not be surprised — for we have been warned that "the letter kills":

Corinthians 3:6b *for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. [NKJV]*

This time "the letter" confuses. Hence, one is encouraged to seek understanding by the Spirit, rather than being ensnared by "the letter" of these passages.

For this purpose, it is helpful to consider what the one "who is spiritual" is to do with having "judge[d] all things":

Galatians 6:1a *Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. [ESV]*

How does one "[catch] anyone in any transgression"? Is it not by discerning transgressions and sinful behavior and thus "judging"?

So the one "who is spiritual" is to discern the transgression and then help, "restore" and not condemn a sinning believer.

So there is judging to discern "all things," which we should do, and there is judging to condemn, in which we must never indulge, because the final judgment of condemnation belongs to God and to God alone.

Romans 14:10b *Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. [NLT]*

Or as Jesus expressed it, very clearly and forcefully:

Matthew 10:28 "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." [NRSV]

Furthermore and for good measure, we never know to which, perhaps unlikely, but repentant, sinner the Lord might bestow His grace and mercy and promise:

Luke 23:43 "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." [NRSV]

How it is that "he who is spiritual judges," is exemplified by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthian church, a carnal church:

1 Corinthians 4:14 *I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. [NASB]*

Paul here clearly exercised judgment in recognizing their sins and — although that might have been the result — his purpose was not to "shame" nor to condemn them, rather to help them by admonishing: a manifestation of his love for them ("beloved children").

Taught by Paul's explanation of the difference between "judging" to discern and "judging" to condemn, let us receive the full measure of Jesus' teaching in the passage at the beginning:

Matthew 7:1–4 "Do not judge so that you will not be judged. ²For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. ³Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." [NASB]

There are two teachings here:

1] God shall apply to us the measure that we apply to others, therefore:

2] yes, we must help our brother, recognize the speck and take it out of his eye; we should not leave the speck there, we should take it out. However, we are to do that only after we have removed the log out of our own eye.

Here is another example of how Paul practiced such teaching and took the speck out of the eye of Peter, his brother in the Lord:

Galatians 2:11–13 *But when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for*

what he did was very wrong. ¹²When he first arrived, he ate with the Gentile Christians, who were not circumcised. But afterward, when some friends of James came, Peter wouldn't eat with the Gentiles anymore. He was afraid of criticism from these people who insisted on the necessity of circumcision. ¹³As a result, other Jewish Christians followed Peter's hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. [NLT]

Paul did not hesitate to discern sinful hypocrisy and — clearly — would not even countenance asking: "Who am I to judge?" and thus appease the sinning brothers. On the contrary, he "opposed Peter to his face" and took a decisive stand for truth and against deceitful hypocrisy.

Perhaps Paul remembered that already in the eighth century before Christ's birth, the prophet Isaiah had noted how speakers of the Lord's word were induced to deceive by hiding sin:

Isaiah 30:9–11 these people are stubborn rebels who refuse to pay attention to the Lord's instructions. ¹⁰They tell the seers, "Stop seeing visions!" They tell the prophets, "Don't tell us what is right. Tell us nice things. Tell us lies. ¹¹Forget all this gloom. Get off your narrow path. Stop telling us about your 'Holy One of Israel.'" [NLT]

Hence, yes, we are instructed to judge and recognize the speck in the brother's eye and not ignore it — Paul did not — but we are to do so only after we have had our own sins taken away. We cannot take the speck out until we ourselves see clearly.

This is a very important assignment and a responsibility we have and it is not the only time Jesus taught it:

Matthew 18:15–17 "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. ¹⁶But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. ¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. [NASB]

There is much "judgment" commanded here in terms of discerning sin and taking decisive action culminating in not letting ourselves and our churches be sullied by sin (whether it is our own sin or somebody else's sin).

Hence, it is not that we are to eschew judgment and discernment, rather we must:

1] Know that we'll be judged the same way we judge and hence, make sure that we are without sin (i.e., we have repented, our sin is hence forgiven at the Cross and we are indeed new creatures in Christ). Thus, our motivation and our spirit will be one of:

2] Exercising judgment and discernment to help our brothers and sisters, not to condemn them.

Caring about another believer is not so much a matter of saying: "You are going to hell because I saw you doing such and such"; rather it is a matter of discerning and understanding what may be weak or missing in the relationship between that soul and the Lord and then of seeking how to deepen and strengthen it.

Paul gives us another example of following these instructions of Jesus in his epistle to the church at Thessalonica:

2 Thessalonians 3:10–15 In fact, when we were with you, this is what we commanded you: "If anyone isn't willing to work, he should not eat." ¹¹For we hear that there are some among you who walk irresponsibly, not working at all, but interfering with the work of others. ¹²Now we command and exhort such people by the Lord Jesus Christ that quietly working, they may eat their own food. ¹³Brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. ¹⁴And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take note of that person; don't associate with him, so that he may be ashamed. ¹⁵Yet don't treat him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. [HCSB]

In fact, here Paul synthesizes all three instructions of Jesus:

- 1]** Do "judge" or recognize or "take note" of disobedient brothers and
- 2]** Do not associate with an impenitent sinner; however,
- 3]** Do not condemn him and do not even treat him as an enemy, but warn him.

In conclusion, let us heed this advice of James:

James 5:19–20 Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, ²⁰let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. [NKJV]

WHO AM I TO JUDGE?

As a child of the Lord Jesus, I am called "to try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world." [KJV] (**1 John 4:1**)