To Judge or Not to Judge

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Don’t judge has become America’s favorite Bible verse. It’s short, memorable and gets the job done. It can shut down debate faster than a New York minute. People often say to me, “Who am I to judge?” People’s comment, “Who am I to judge?”, is intended to reinforce this same point.

Alan Wolfe teaches political science at Boston College. He wrote something in his book, One Nation, After All, that intrigues me: “Middle class Americans have an almost pathological fear of appearing judgmental, so they have added an 11th commandment. Thou shall not judge.” Maybe it’s America’s one and only commandment.

Richard Mouw writes about a gathering of seminary professors. Mouw was President of Fuller Seminary in California for many years. One professor at his school said the most damaging charge any student can levy against another is to accuse that person of being judgmental. “You can’t get a great debate going in class anymore,” he says. “As soon as someone takes a stand on any issue, someone else will say the other person is being judgmental. And that’s it. End of discussion. Everyone is intimidated.” “It isn’t possible to be completely nonjudgmental,” Mouw writes. “Even telling someone that they are being judgmental is a rather judgmental thing to do.”

How is it possible to make appropriate moral judgments without being judgmental? Lots of Christians must be struggling with this question. The book unChristian is a compilation of research conducted by the Barna group among those born between the years 1965 and 2002. The title of the book references those who are self-identified as atheists, agnostics or members of other religions. Nearly nine out of ten young outsiders in the study—87 percent—said the term judgmental accurately describes present-day Christianity.

Everything in our Scripture lesson hinges on the meaning of this one little word, “judge,” as contained in the opening imperative, “Do not judge.” The Greek word for judge has two essential meanings. The first meaning is to assess a situation and make a determination about someone. Making assessments is a necessary part of daily life. Parents assess their children’s behavior to determine whether to exercise leniency or discipline. Coaches and teachers
Final judgment is God’s prerogative. assess the skill level of students to instruct them appropriately. The defining mark of a moral society is precisely its ability to make judgments on things that truly matter.

The second definition of the word judge is to condemn someone, to become censorious and punitive. Most of us can handle honest assessment. What really rocks our world is when we feel judged and condemned by someone.

Condemning people isn’t our call. That’s why Scripture regards “go to hell” as especially grievous. Final judgment is God’s prerogative.

This second definition of judgment as condemnation is precisely what Jesus intends in our lesson. It’s reinforced by the next phrase, “Do not condemn and you will not be condemned” (6:37). I like the way Eugene Peterson translates this verse. “Don’t pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults—unless, of course, you want the same treatment” (The Message).

These two negative imperatives, “Do not judge” and “Do not condemn,” are followed by two positive imperatives: “Forgive and you will be forgiven” in verse 37 and “Give and it will be given to you” in verse 38. These positive imperatives counterbalance Jesus’ earlier warning about judging people with an eye to condemning them. Exercising forgiveness and generosity hasten God’s blessing just as judging and condemning people invites God’s judgment.

Verses 39-40 function like a parable in Jesus’ sermon. Jesus asks whether a blind man can lead another blind man. His question anticipates a negative reply. No, a blind man can’t lead a blind man. Our modern idiom about the blind leading the blind is drawn from this verse. Jesus asks a followup question, “Will they not both fall into a pit?” His question implies an affirmative response. Yes, they’ll fall into the pit together. Blind people cannot possibly lead blind people.

Jesus tells a related parable, in verse 40, about a student who elevates himself above his teacher. If Jesus is the consummate teacher, then no servant who claims allegiance to him can transcend his teaching. Jesus warns his disciples about the danger of taking the high moral ground whenever we judge people.

Jesus’ teaching closes with a hyperbole in verses 41-42. A hyperbole exaggerates something to prove a point. Jesus often employs hyperbole in his ministry. He talks about camels trying to squeeze through the eye of a needle (Matthew 19:24) and plucking out eyes if they cause us to sin (Matthew 5:29). In a stroke of hyperbolic genius, Jesus likens the speck in our neighbor’s eye to the log in our own eye. The log here refers to a building beam or
Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle."
- Philo

Philo rafter, so we’re talking a really big log, folks. The exaggeration is almost comical. Picture someone with a log in his eye trying to remove the speck in someone else’s eye.

Jesus closes off his teaching, “You hypocrite, first take the beam out of your own eye so you can see clearly to take the speck from your neighbor’s eye” (6:42).

Hypocrite is a compound of two Greek words taken from the world of theater. People who play a role are called hypocrites. This is where we derive the comedy and tragic masks from Greek theater. Hypocrisy means to play a part, similar to an actor or actress on stage.

The charge that often is levied against Christians like us is one of hypocrisy. Our critics have a point. Christians are particularly susceptible to hypocrisy. Yet, to be fair, hypocrisy isn’t unique to Christians. It’s universal to say things we don’t do and do things we say we will never do.

So, what difference does this sermon make in my life? How can we make appropriate assessments about people without condemning them? Let me offer a few suggestions for your consideration.

Don’t judge by appearances. We’re told in Samuel that “People judge by outward appearances, but God judges the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). In common parlance, we sometimes say, “You can’t judge a book by its cover.”

In the early 1980s, it was decided that people judging auditions for symphony orchestras were swayed by things like appearance, first impressions and how people presented themselves on stage. So, audition screens were installed to conceal the identity of the people being auditioned.

In 1985, a 29-year-old French horn player, Julie Landsman, auditioned for first chair in New York’s mighty Metropolitan Opera. There were no women in the brass section of the orchestra in those days. Julie nailed her audition. When the all-male judging panel named her the winner, she stepped out from behind the audition screen and the panelists were stunned on two accounts. First, she was a young female. Second, they knew her. She had sometimes played in the orchestra as a substitute. Because she was cast in this role, they had no idea she was this talented. It was only when they listened with their ears that they discovered her prodigious talent.

Don’t judge prematurely. Some people prefer drive-by judging. It may be quick and convenient to make snap judgments, but it is often superficial. I think of the common expression, “Don’t judge someone until you’ve walked a mile in his shoes.” I like what the first century philosopher Philo
writes, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.”

The focus in this passage is on self-examination. “Take the log out of your own eye and you’ll see clearly to remove the speck in your neighbor’s eye (6:42).

Don’t judge using stereotypes. Stereotype is a word dating back to the printing business in the early 1800s. It’s a word meaning to make “a solid impression.” Stereotypes may be desirable in working with print mediums, but it doesn’t translate well to working with people. Whenever we cast people in a preset mold, we take away their individuality. It is problematic to stereotype one another by race, gender, age, mental capacity, disability; you name it. “Take the log out of your eye and you’ll see clearly to remove the speck in your neighbor’s eye” (6:42).

Don’t judge in matters of personal preference. Paul warns us to refrain from judging on “disputable matters” in Romans 14. Disputable matters have to do with practices in the Christian life not specifically addressed by Scripture. In Paul’s letter to the Romans, debatable matters address issues like kosher foods and Sabbath day practices. I would liken it today to drinking alcoholic beverages, manner of dress and choice of music. Here’s one—whether you prefer organ or guitar in worship. Whether a church sings traditional hymns or contemporary worship songs would be a matter of personal preference.

Judge with humility. Jesus summons us to humility in his sermon. “Take the log out of your own eye before you take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye” (6:42).

As we prepare to enter into prayer, I invite you to take a mental inventory as you consider this matter of judging. Maybe you’re the one doing the judging. You’ve been hasty and harsh in your judgment of someone in your family or circle of friends. You desire God’s forgiveness and pray for new resolve in exercising forbearance in your relationship with someone.

Perhaps you’re on the receiving end of judging. You feel unfairly judged and condemned by someone in your family or in this sanctuary. You feel like this person has been dive-bombing you with accusatory words, leaving you feeling attacked and vulnerable.

The defining mark of a moral society is precisely its ability to make decisions on things that matter. How can we make appropriate assessments about people without condemning them?