

# Judge Not

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Anyone who is somewhat familiar with Jesus' teachings knows that He told us not to judge. But the differences of opinion over what He meant by this, as well as the actions of many Christians, reveal that a lot of people are apparently confused about this subject. Did Jesus intend that we never judge anyone on any matter? Was His aim that we not judge our brethren but that we have an obligation to show the world its sins? Did He mean that we should judge moral infractions but not be critical about doctrine? Or did He want us to be discerning over doctrine but soft on morality? In this article, I intend to show from the Bible when/what/who we are to judge and when/what/who we are not to judge. Also, I'll point out the harm of judging when we are not supposed to.

## **Jesus' "Judge Not" Scriptures**

In Matthew 7:1-5, Jesus taught,

Don't judge, so that you won't be judged. For with whatever judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but don't consider the beam that is in your own eye? Or how will you tell your brother, "Let me remove the speck from your eye;" and behold, the beam is in your own eye? You hypocrite! First remove the beam out of your own eye, and then you can see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye.

The words of Jesus that Luke records are even more succinct: "Don't judge, and you won't be judged. Don't condemn, and you won't be condemned. Set free, and you will be set free" (Luke 6:37).

This seems plain enough. Yet the confusion I mentioned persists. Whom are we not to judge, and in what way? This is further complicated by the fact that elsewhere, Jesus specifically ordered judging.

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## Judging Fruit

In reply to the Jews who condemned Him for healing a man on the Sabbath, Jesus said, "Don't judge according to appearance, but judge righteous judgment" (John 7:24). In other words, the Jews, in saying that it was unlawful to heal on the Sabbath, were misapplying the Sabbath law, which was at that time still in force. The Jews saw healing on the Sabbath as working on the Sabbath. But this was wrongheaded. Rather, they should have seen healing on the Sabbath as giving people rest from their suffering on the day that pictured rest. That would have been righteous judgment. So, we see here that Jesus connects the right kind of judging—the kind of judging He says we ought to be doing—with discerning right doctrine.

In Matthew 7:20, Jesus said, "Therefore, by their fruits you will know them." As I explain in the article, "What is the fruit by which we are to know people?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/matthew7qa.htm>), the fruit that we are to use to know whether people are good or corrupt is what they teach, their doctrines. So, in Matthew 7:15-20, Jesus is specifically telling us to judge someone by the doctrines he or she teaches.

We see this in practice in the book of Acts where we find that the people in Berea who heard Paul speak, "were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). Examining Scripture to see whether what someone says is biblical is a kind of judging, and this verse calls those who practice it noble.

In giving instructions for how the assembly of the saints is to be conducted, Paul says, "Let the prophets speak, two or three, and let the others discern" (1 Corinthians 14:29). The word "discern" is from the Greek word *diakrinō*, which literally means to thoroughly judge. Paul was saying that after someone spoke, the others were to judge whether what he said was correct. In 1 Corinthians 12:10, Paul even lists the "discerning [thorough judging] of spirits" as a spiritual gift.

From these Scriptures, we must conclude that when Jesus told us not to judge, He did not mean that we are not to judge the doctrine that someone teaches. In fact, as we just saw, He and Paul specifically tell us that we should judge the doctrine that people teach. (For more information about the importance of doctrine, see "Is Doctrine a Dirty Word?" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/doctrinedirty.htm>).

Going back to our original questions, we can answer that we are to judge doctrinal matters. And this applies to what anyone teaches, whether the person is a known member of our assembly or not. What we are to judge them by is whether what they teach is supported by Scripture. They should, as Paul instructed Timothy, be "rightly dividing the Word of Truth" (2 Timothy 2:15, *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*).

### **Judging Our Brethren in Nonessentials**

In Romans 14, Paul instructs the brethren in Rome on how they should treat each other regarding two nonessential matters—eating or not eating meat, and keeping or not keeping a day. I won't quote the entire chapter, but I want to show you the verses in which judging is specifically mentioned:

Don't let him who doesn't eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you who judge another's servant?... But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.... Therefore let's not judge one another any more, but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block in his brother's way, or an occasion for falling.... Happy is he who doesn't judge himself in that which he approves.

Romans 14:3-4a, 10, 13, 22b

These admonitions against judging our brethren fully agree with Jesus' command concerning judging. Keep in mind that Paul is talking about personal practice, not teaching. For example, if a brother in our congregation believes that he should keep a day as a Sabbath day, brethren who understand that the New Covenant does not have a Sabbath day must not be judgmental or condemning toward him. If he is willing to listen, they can try to teach him the truth in love, but they must not be harsh and critical.

But if the Sabbath-keeping brother tries to teach the brethren (either by addressing them as an assembled body or by speaking to them individually), the brethren are to judge him as teaching wrong doctrine and tell him to stop. If he does not stop, he is to then be treated as Paul instructed Titus to handle such people: "Avoid a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a one is perverted and sins, being self-condemned" (Titus 3:10-11). And yet our attitude must be what Paul describes in 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15: "If any man

doesn't obey our word in this letter, note that man, that you have no company with him, to the end that he may be ashamed. Don't count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."

By the way, I see no Scriptures that would prevent a speaker in the assembly or a Christian writer from teaching the truth about the ending of the Sabbath. We must not stop teaching the truth simply because some people persist in keeping days. I have often written against Sabbath keeping and other legalist practices. I do this to make the truth available to those whom God has made ready to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. And many have been helped. Another reason I have written these articles is to counter the legalist doctrines that many Sabbath keepers are publicly promoting. My desire is to keep others from falling for the bad fruit—the wrong doctrine—they are espousing by proving that doctrine wrong from the Bible.

So, as long as brothers and sisters are not teaching wrong doctrine, we are not to judge them over their personal beliefs. But we should teach the truth, stop wrong teaching from being advanced in the assembly, and counter it when it is advanced in the public arena. Beliefs such as day-keeping and vegetarianism are held by "weak" brethren (Romans 14:1-2). As the Christian grows stronger spiritually, he can and should give up these weak beliefs.

### **Judging Our Brethren's Morality**

But what about judging morality? Does the Bible say that we should be watching over each other's morality? Not if by this we mean that we are to be watching for and pointing out each other's sins and faults. In fact, Paul is critical of busybodies and meddlers (2 Thessalonians 3:11; 1 Timothy 5:13).

Let's look at the reasons for this. Recalling what Jesus said in Matthew 7:1-5, we know that when we look for the speck in our brother's eye, we cannot see the beam in our own eye. No human being can claim his own righteousness. The righteousness of Christians is not our own. It is an alien righteousness; it is the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to us: "They have all turned aside. They have together become unprofitable. There is no one who does good, no, not, so much as one.... But now apart from the law, a righteousness of God has been revealed, being testified by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all those who believe. For there is no distinction, for all have sinned, and

fall short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:12, 21-24).

Paul writes of David who "pronounces blessing on the man to whom God counts [or "imputes"] righteousness apart from works" (Romans 4:6). And he says in Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast." Let's put it this way: If every bit of Joe's righteousness is credited to him from Jesus' righteousness because God has given Joe the gift of trusting in Jesus as his Savior, what right does Joe have to point out the sins of his fellow believers whose righteousness also comes from Christ? Again, recalling what Jesus said in Matthew 7:5, since Joe is, in and of himself, a sinner, he would be a hypocrite to point a finger at anyone else and call him or her a sinner.

We Christians are not to meddle into each other's lives trying to use authority God has not given us to judge the "specks" in our brothers' and sisters' eyes. To do so is to accuse our brethren and put ourselves in league with the accuser of the brethren, who is Satan the devil (Revelation 12:10). Such accusations are always in vain because "there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who don't walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death" (Romans 8:1-2). New Covenant law is a law of love and does not include condemnation.

But while we are not to look at our fellow Christians for the purpose of finding fault, there are occasions when we are to help a brother or sister who has fallen.

In Galatians 6:1, Paul says, "Brothers, even if a man is caught in some fault, you who are spiritual must restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to yourself so that you also aren't tempted." Does this contradict what Jesus said about not judging? No. Why? Because it is not looking for the speck in our brother's eye. Paul is telling us to restore a brother, not accuse him.

In this case, the brother's fault actually catches him by surprise—the word "caught" in the verse is from *prolambanō*, which indicates that the brother is seized by the fault, or caught off guard, before he realizes it. And the word "fault" is translated from *paraptōma*, which means to fall to the side. The physical picture of this would be a group of people nonchalantly walking along a road when, before one of them

has time to react to what is happening, he steps off the side of the road and falls into the ditch. His companions can have either one of two reactions. They can look at him and say, "You idiot! Why didn't you watch where you were going?" That is, they can very unhelpfully judge him. Or, they can, being careful that they don't also fall in, give him a hand and help him out of the ditch. The latter is what is pictured in Galatians 6:1. We who are spiritual are to gently, without condemnation, help the brother up, and we are to humbly remember our own sinful nature lest we also be tempted. There is no judging or condemnation involved.

Now we come to 1 Corinthians 5. This is often cited to make a case for judging a brother for his sin. But again, the emphasis is not on judging someone. Paul is upset with the entire congregation because a brother fell into the ditch and they, out of a misguided understanding of being broadminded and tolerant, left him there. Because they left the brother in his gross sexual immorality, he no doubt became more entrenched in it and the issue became a public scandal. So Paul had to take a more drastic action than would have been necessary if the Corinthian assembly had lovingly helped the brother immediately.

Paul rebukes the Corinthian brethren for being so mistakenly tolerant that they turned a blind eye to a member having a sexual relationship with his father's wife (probably the member's stepmother): "Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole lump?" (verse 6). Their tolerance was harmful both to the errant brother and to the entire congregation because there was a danger that others might follow his example. But even in these drastic circumstances, Paul does not accuse anyone for the sake of pointing out sin. He keeps the welfare of the fallen brother and the assembly uppermost in his mind. His remedy is twofold. They are to deliver the offender "to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Corinthians 5:5). Paul also speaks of this in 1 Timothy 1:20. We don't know what this means, and it may have been something only the apostles could do. Its point, however, was the destruction of the flesh, apparently meaning the destruction of the person's sinful carnality. And they were to "put away the wicked man from among yourselves" (verse 13). As we see in 2 Corinthians 2, the brother repented, was accepted back, and all turned out well.

In the course of giving his instructions to the Corinthian brothers, Paul wrote, "But as it is, I wrote to you not to associate with anyone who is called a brother who is a sexual sinner, or covetous, or an idolater, or

a slanderer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner. Don't even eat with such a person" (1 Corinthians 5:11). This is far beyond finding a speck in our brother's eye. Brothers who have such labels are in need of extreme measures. It is under these circumstances that we are to "judge those who are within" (verse 12b).

So we see that we are to judge what Christians teach. But we are not to judge our brethren over nonessential, personal practices. And we are not to be judgmental in an accusing way toward our brethren over the sins which so easily entangle us all (Hebrews 12:1). That is, we are not to be hypocrites looking for specks in their eyes, because we also have specks or even worse. We must not be the devil's advocate in accusing them, because Jesus died for their sins. But we are to act in love and help them when they fall, and, when someone becomes hardened in sin, we are to remove the offender from our fellowship with the aim that he will repent and can be restored.

In the second installment, we will see how, or even whether, Christians are to judge the world.