

Is It Always Wrong to Judge Others?

March 2023

Ask any American: judging is wrong. Except, of course, when it's not. It's wrong to judge someone's sexual behavior—but it's perfectly legitimate to judge someone's hate speech. It's wrong to judge someone's parenting—but it's legitimate to judge someone's political views. It's wrong to judge someone's social media consumption—but it's legitimate to judge someone for wearing fur. We suffer from a kind of split personality disorder.

But the problem isn't judging, of course. Judging involves discerning between what is preferable and what is undesirable, between what is good and what is bad. Sometimes judging is not merely permissible, but even a duty. God commanded the Jews to judge in Leviticus 11:47, "You must distinguish between the unclean and the clean." The Bible commands Christians to "test the spirits" rather than believing just anything. (1 John 4:1) Fathers are commanded to raise their children "in the training and admonition of the Lord"—such admonishing involves judging. (Ephesians 6:4)

We all, religious or not, must judge situations, people, speech, media, pop culture, and more to decide if we should participate or separate. Distinguishing is the primary skill we should be teaching our children and helping one another to improve.

In the beginning, God judged what was good (the fruit of all the trees) and bad (the fruit of one particular tree) and asked the humans to accept His judgment. They did not. They were tempted to re-define good and evil, right and wrong, for themselves. Ever since, we have been making poor judgments about what is good and bad for ourselves and others. And when our views are incompatible with each other, conflict erupts—abusive words, even violence on the personal, national, or international levels.

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That is why God promised a new human who would judge correctly. Through the prophet Isaiah, God said, "The Spirit of Yahweh will rest on the Messiah—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding. . . . With righteousness He will judge the needy, with justice He will give decisions for the poor of the earth." (Isaiah 11:2–4)

Jesus is that new human on whom the Spirit of God rests; yet He was falsely judged to be guilty of blasphemy. He was the object of abusive words and violence leading all the way to His crucifixion. But He overcame that death in His resurrection, and now offers hope to His disciples that they too will overcome false judgments and condemnations in their own bodily resurrections.

Today, Jesus discerns between those on whom His Spirit rests and those who have rejected that Spirit in favor of their own judgments of good and bad. The Spirit of God rests on the followers of Jesus, teaching them how to discern good and bad according to His will rather than their preferences. Christians must tell the truth, and that includes telling the truth about sin. What we want to help each other avoid, however, is judging with hypocrisy. Christians must make judgments about sin that match Jesus' own judgments. Christians are not free to make the Bible either more strict or more lax.

Christ-like judging goes beyond speaking the moral truth. It also listens for opportunities to advance the conversation with Law and Gospel according to each person's need. Jesus told people the truth. Jesus sometimes condemned people. He also looked with compassion at people. He loved people despite the fact that they were in the wrong.

People—including us—aren't merely mistaken or confused when it comes to *discernment*. Worse, we also think evil thoughts and commit evil actions and therefore deserve *condemning judgment* from God. Jesus took upon Himself that condemnation, by dying for us on the cross.

This beautiful Savior wants to draw you close today to share with you the justice and righteousness that He desires for all people. Moreover, He offers you His own righteousness in a merciful exchange for your sinful thoughts, words, and actions. He offers you His Holy Spirit, who will help you to see clearly so that your judgment can guide others.

Rev. Aaron Ferkenstad is pastor at King of Grace Lutheran Church, Golden Valley, Minnesota.

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