

How Must We Judge?

■ Judgment is a major subject in the Bible and one of "the weightier matters of the law" (Matthew 23:23, King James Version). **Unjust judgment is an abomination to God.**

From God's Word, we must learn and practice "righteous judgment."

by Don Hooser

Judging is an essential part of a godly life. Jesus ranked "judgment" on the level of "the love of God" (Luke 11:42, KJV).

Of course, we must confine judging to what God wants us to judge. We humans are limited to perceiving actions and attitudes. We dare not overstep into "the judgment seat of Christ" by presuming to be self-appointed judges of others (Romans 14:10). We must not condemn others or even sound condemning (Luke 6:37; Matthew 5:22).

Judgment is a big subject as there are several related meanings of the English words *judge* (a noun and verb) and *judgment* and the Hebrew and Greek words translated as *judge* and *judgment*. **Hopefully this will whet your appetite to further study this subject in the Bible.**

Regrettably, over the past few centuries, the English word *judgment* has been viewed increasingly in a negative light. Therefore biblical Hebrew and Greek words that had been previously translated as *judgment* are increasingly being translated as *justice*. For example, in the King James Version, *judgment* appears 294 times and *justice* 28 times. In the New King James Version (finished in 1982), *judgment* appears 188 times and *justice* 130 times.

Let us simply think of human judging as the process of analyzing, evaluating, assessing, distinguishing, perceiving, discerning, etc. Justice is an impartial process of godly judgment.

Part of the confusion is the current tendency to equate all *judging* with being *judgmental*. But look at a thesaurus. Synonyms for *judgmental* are *prejudiced, biased, slanted, bigoted*. A *judgmental* person is fault-finding, overly-critical and accusatory. Therefore, he is a poor judge, often doing more harm than good.

God's way of judging is a good thing. We can "distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:14, New International Version) because we have God's Word and His laws. However, we need diligent study, spiritual maturity and God's guidance to "rightly divide the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

We make judgments for many reasons. **We must "distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean" (Leviticus 10:10).** We must judge how to avoid temptations and bad influences (1 Corinthians 6:18; 10:14). We must be good judges of character in choosing our companions (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1).

Sometimes Church leaders must judge disputes or bad conduct within the Church (1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 6:1-6). If correction or disciplinary action is needed, it should be done **gently out of love** for all con-

cerned to *restore* the offender to the path of salvation (Galatians 6:1; James 5:19-20). **And wherever possible, we should avoid embarrassing anyone.** In most cases the rule to follow is: Praise in public and correct in private.

Much Wisdom in Old Testament

Our decisions are based on our judgment, and our judgment should be based on "the wisdom that is from above" (James 3:17).

The book of Proverbs is full of exhortations to "get wisdom" (Proverbs 4:5), as well as discretion and prudence (foresight, forethought, carefulness, common sense—1:4). So pray regularly for godly wisdom and guidance (Colossians 1:9; James 1:5).

God places great emphasis on *impartiality* in judgment (Proverbs 24:23; 28:21). **He forbade prejudice or favoritism toward rich or poor, Israelite or foreigner, friend or foe (Exodus 23:3-7; 12:49; Leviticus 19:15).** We should exercise this "judicial blindness" towards a person's gender, race, rank or any other factor that is irrelevant to the issue at hand.

Don't be swayed by popular opinion and never take any kind of bribe (Exodus 23:2, 8; Deuteronomy 16:19). Be on guard against any conflict of interest that could consciously or subconsciously distort your judgment.

Judging must involve some kind of *measuring* by a consistent authorized *standard*, whether physical or spiritual. "Do not use dishonest standards when measuring length, weight or quantity. Use honest scales and honest weights, an honest ephah and an honest hin. I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:35-36, NIV; see also Deuteronomy 25:13-16; Proverbs 11:1; 20:10, 23).

Immediately after the above instruction, God refers to His *spiritual* standards of measurement: "Keep all my decrees and all my laws and follow them. I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:37, NIV). Judgment should be based on God's laws, not our personal standards and preferences.

Listen First and Hear All Sides

"Listen before you answer. If you don't, you are stupid and insulting" (Proverbs 18:13, Today's English Version). "What a shame, what a folly, to give advice before listening to the facts" (same verse, New Living Translation). Consider all the pertinent facts before judging or deciding an issue or giving advice. **Seek truth!**

And listen impartially to both sides—all sides—before forming opinions. "The one who first states a case seems right, until the other comes and cross-examines" (Proverbs 18:17, New Revised Standard Version). This is so true! Often the full truth is somewhere in between the two stories.

Discrepancies occur when one or more people are lying. But discrepancies occur for other reasons too. A person may have blind spots, not being aware of how his background and biases are affecting his testimony. We often can't remember perfectly. Emotions can cloud our thinking. And people even have different definitions for their words.

Keep in mind that we all have human nature that tends to resent unsolicited correction and advice. Even when counseling is requested, a wise counselor will be very respectful, tactful and gentle toward all parties.

Appearance Versus the Heart

When God sent Samuel to anoint the next king, first he met David's impressive older brothers. "But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart'" (1 Samuel 16:7).

Jesus said, "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment" (John 7:24). Or, as the Good News Bible translates it, "Stop judging by external standards, and judge by true standards."

As much as humanly possible, these statements by God and Christ should guide us. **We should be concerned about attitudes over appearance, true character over clothes and inner beauty over outer beauty.** "Charm can be deceiving, and beauty fades away, but a woman [or man] who honors the LORD deserves to be praised" (Proverbs 31:30, Contemporary English Version).

Therefore, good judgment requires considerable time—the time required to really get to know the attitudes of a person's heart. We mustn't jump to conclusions or rush to judgment. We must be patient, "swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath" (James 1:19). Generally, time must first be spent in building trust before advice and correction will be welcomed. The stronger the *bridge* of friendship, the more weighty advice that can be delivered.

It also makes us realize how limited we are as humans compared to God who can read minds and hearts at an

instant. Hence, we human beings must be humble and very careful as we form opinions and before we begin to correct anyone.

We must also take into account a person's level of understanding and spiritual maturity in order to know how accountable he is for his actions. "Sin is not imputed when there is no [knowledge of] law" (Romans 5:13). "To him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin" (James 4:17).

There are many things that a new babe in Christ will not understand right away. It's much more important to make him feel welcomed and loved than to be in a hurry to correct any mistakes he is making (Romans 14:1).

We are faced with a challenging balancing act. On one hand, we are to try to discern attitudes and take them into account. On the other hand, we must be cautious because we can easily think we know a person's heart better than we really do. When an attitude is not clear, we should reserve judgment until it becomes clear. True love is not suspicious but optimistic (1 Corinthians 13:4-6).

Every person is different—a mix of many different personality traits, habits, strengths and weaknesses. Each person is shaped by the varied experiences of his past, both good and bad. It's tempting to look down on others, especially if they have noticeable weaknesses.

We ought to humbly think, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." Paul said, "What makes you better than anyone else? What do you have that God hasn't given you? And if all you have is from God, why boast as though you have accomplished something on your own?" (1 Corinthians 4:7, NLT).

Seek Resolution and Reconciliation

If you have been mistreated, hurt or wrongly judged, remember the principles

taught in the Bible about conflict resolution. Pray for wisdom, love, humility and tactfulness, and then speak privately with the offending brother or sister to clear up any misunderstandings and to pursue reconciliation.

This applies equally to all of us in God's Church. For example, **if you feel a minister has wronged you or is hurting someone else in some way, don't complain and gossip to others or allow a growing resentment.** Pray about it and then go to him and explain your concerns. That's the true Christian approach.

We should all be open to others bringing up any of their concerns to us. And members of the United Church of God should know that **our Church has an appeals process. If you have diligently tried to iron out a serious disagreement directly with a minister but you feel there has not been justice, members have the right to appeal to the next level of Church authority.**

Judgment, Justice and Mercy

Throughout the Bible we see that godly judgment is based on both justice and mercy. (There could be no mercy if there was not the framework and foundation of justice.)

"Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13). God has judged us all as being worthy of death, but by His mercy He removes that penalty from those who are repentant and merciful to others. If we make a mistake in judgment, it's better to err on the side of mercy. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7).

We must never be like the scribes and Pharisees who would "bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders" (Matthew 23:4).

However, mercy does not mean injustice, such as any kind of favoritism. Mercy is not robbing from one person to give to another, like some kind of Robin Hood. Mercy is something voluntarily given.

Extending generous mercy is especially important when the person is truly repentant and when the mercy will likely help him spiritually.

An essential kind of mercy is forgiveness. Forgiveness is a big and wonderful subject that deserves much more space than we can give it here.

God is the perfect example of being amazingly forgiving. "LORD, if you kept a record of our sins, who O Lord, could ever survive? But you offer forgiveness, that we might learn to fear you" (Psalm 130:3-4, NLT).

God expects us to follow that example. Jesus said, "Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37).

Let's remember this: With all kinds of godly judgment, the emphasis should be on the present and the future, not the past (Ezekiel 18:27-32). What really counts is what the person does from now on.

"Therefore be merciful, just as your Father is also merciful" (Luke 6:36). Anyone exercising judgment had better be merciful!

"He [God] has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). Judge righteous judgment! **UN**

Judging in Matthew 7

Matthew 7:1 is one of the most-quoted verses in the Bible: "Judge not that you be not judged." It is also one of the most misjudged (misunderstood and misapplied) verses!

It is often quoted by those who are doing something wrong but don't want anyone telling them that they are wrong.

A good start for understanding Matthew 7:1 is to read the next four verses. Jesus does not disapprove of the desire "to remove the speck [of sin] from your brother's eye" (verse 5). However, you must first "see" (judge) the speck with humility, clarity and accuracy.

In order to do that, "first remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly..." Scrutinizing ourselves and repenting of our own sins must be first in order and first in priority. After repentance and spiritual growth, we can better "see" the way God sees.

Often it is those who have huge sins (planks) who tend to be self-righteous, opinionated, judgmental, unmerciful and accusatory. Jesus said a person who does this is a "hypocrite" (verse 5).

According to verse 2, we will receive the kind of judgment we have dished out to others. If we want to receive patience, mercy, forgiveness and generosity from God, we must be patient, merciful, forgiving and generous toward others (see also Luke 6:36-38).

God's people definitely must make judgments. We must judge which gate leads to life and which leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13-14). We must judge (recognize as deceivers) any "false prophets [preachers or teachers] who come to you" (verse 15). "You will know [judge] them by their fruits" (verses 16-20). Jesus proceeds to tell us that good fruit is doing the will of God and bad fruit is spiritual lawlessness (verses 21-23). In fact, the whole Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5, 6 and 7) is largely about how we should judge matters according to the true spirit of God's law as well as the letter of the law.