

CF View: How to Judge Without Being Judgmental

There are two major concerns when it comes to judging:

1. The hesitation to judge. Relativism and the pervasive call to tolerance hold us back from any kind of judging at all.
2. The opposite danger is the delight in judging. Modern day hypocritical Pharisees condemn people left and right.

How can we avoid both the cowardly hesitation to judge and the dark delight in judging? Many people try to avoid any judging no matter how extreme the issue. Others condemn people freely.

What does the Bible say? One of the most well-known and quoted Bible verses in America is Matthew 7:1, "Do not judge." But when we really look at the Bible, it can be confusing.

Do Judge	Do not Judge
<i>Judge correctly (John 7:24b)</i>	<i>Do not judge (Matthew 7:1a)</i>
<i>Are you not to judge those inside? (1 Corinthians 5:12b)</i>	<i>Who are you to judge your neighbor? (James 4:12b)</i>
<i>The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things (1 Corinthians 2:15a)</i>	<i>Why do you judge your brother or sister? (Romans 14:10a)</i>

On the one hand, the Bible tells us to judge. Jesus said in John 7:24b, "Judge correctly." Many times, Jesus made judgments about people for having faith or not, for abusing their religion. He had strong words for the Pharisees. And yet Jesus said, "*Do not judge.*"

Paul said in 1 Corinthians: *Are you not to judge those inside?*

And yet in Romans, he said: *Why do you judge your brother?*

Paul said in 1 Corinthians: *The spiritual man makes judgments about all things.*

But James asked: *Who are you to judge your neighbor?*

At first glance, it looks like the Bible contradicts itself. What does God want us to do? Are we supposed to judge or not?

Jesus said, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" (Matthew 7:1). What did he mean? He could not mean to suspend our critical faculties or to refuse to discern between truth and error, goodness and evil. This verse comes in the middle of Jesus' longest talk, what is classically called the Sermon on the Mount. Throughout his talk, Jesus calls us to make judgments. For instance, in the immediate context, in verse six Jesus said, "Do not give dogs what is sacred" – some sort of negative judgment is required!

A little further on in verse 15, Jesus warned, "Watch out for false prophets. They come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves." Jesus requires that his followers evaluate prophets and discriminate between true ones and false ones. In fact, he warned that some will try to deceive you as wolves in sheep's clothing so we must be sharp in our judgment, so we do not get taken in by deception.

If Jesus did not say that we are to avoid judging all together, what was he saying? Much of the confusion here is resolved when the semantic range of the Greek word translated "judge" is understood. The word can mean, "to separate, distinguish, discriminate between good and evil, select, choose out the good." However, it can also mean "to be judgmental, to condemn (judicially or otherwise)."

As in English, so also in Greek, the context must determine the precise shade of meaning. From the vivid illustration of the plank and the speck (Matthew 7:3), the context here argues that the verse means, do not be judgmental; do not adopt a critical spirit or a condemning attitude. Jesus warned us against the ultimate tragedy of the hypocrite; self-deception. A person can reach the place where he is deluded into thinking he is more righteous than other people and so has the right to condemn them.

JUDGE WITHOUT BEING JUDGMENTAL

We must avoid the two opposite dangers: a hesitation to judge and a delight in being judgmental. We do that by judging without being judgmental. Jesus was not telling us to be blind, but gracious. Typically, we love extremes. We like our world black and white; either to avoid judging entirely or be wildly judgmental condemning all we disagree with. But the Bible calls us to wisdom. Knowing that we should be gracious should not evacuate our judgment nor should knowing that we should judge justify harping criticism and harsh condemnation. What does wise judging look like in contrast with sinful judgmentalism?

Wise Judging	Sinful Judgmentalism
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Distinguish	Condemn
Loving	Demeaning
Discriminate	Destroy
Discern	Despise
Biblical	Prejudicial (opinion)
Humble	Hypocritical
Make a choice	Make a mess

1. Wise judging distinguishes right from wrong; sinful judgmentalism condemns another person for what they think. Only God has the right to condemn. Our responsibility is to distinguish.
2. Wise judging loves; sinful judgmentalism demeans. James said, "Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13). We are to speak the truth in love, but not to demean another human being.
3. Wise judging discriminates good from evil; sinful judgmentalism seeks to destroy another person. We are to be discriminating in our moral choices, including our choice of friends, but we are not to be destructive of others.
4. Wise judging discerns wise from foolish. Judgmentalism despises a person who does not agree with us.
5. Wise judging is biblical. Sinful judgmentalism is often prejudicial, based on opinion. The Pharisees judged others based on their external code of behavior. Jesus judged based on the Word of God. When you bring the Bible to bear, it is the Word of God that judges rather than your opinions.
6. Wise judging is humbly realizing we are off-base ourselves in many ways, knowing our own huge need for God's grace. Judgmentalism is hypocritical self-righteously seeing oneself as superior to another person.
7. Wise judging makes a choice. Sinful judgmentalism makes a mess, hurting people.

God does not want us to be undiscerning blobs who never under any circumstance whatsoever hold any opinions about right and wrong. Are we to say nothing about the rights and wrongs of a Hitler, of adultery, economic exploitation, laziness or deceit?

Nor does God want us to be judgmental hypocrites with a superior, "I'm better than you" attitude. With a full humble recognition of our own guilt and fallibility, we use the critical faculties God has given us to make judgments based on his written revelation, the Word of God.

How do you know if you are being judgmental? You may be judgmental if another person's failure decreases your concern for your own faults. If you are eager to tell about another's person's problems, then you may be judgmental. If their failure improves your opinion of yourself, you may be being judgmental.

There are two directions from God's Word on how we are not to be judgmental and how we are to judge.

DO NOT BE JUDGMENTAL

1. By assuming the place of God to issue a verdict

Listen to how Paul pushed back on some people who were being judgmental toward him. He appealed to the truth that God will judge us. Only God knows our hearts and only God has the authority to issue a final verdict on our beliefs and behavior. Paul wrote:

My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God (1 Corinthians 4:4-5).

Ultimately, we are accountable to God. On earth we do have God-given authorities to respect and obey, but our final judge is only the Lord God. So we are wrong to ever try to assume his place and issue a verdict on another person. To be judgmental is to presume arrogantly to anticipate the Day of Judgment, to usurp the prerogative of the divine judge, in fact to try to play God. The Apostle James made a similar point when he wrote:

There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor? (James 4:12)

Not one of us stands in the place of God and is able to say who is saved and who is not. We can and should use our discernment to see where a person is spiritually and share the Gospel, but our role is not to issue a final verdict on where a person will spend eternity. That is God's prerogative.

We can point people to the Word of God and show them that Jesus Christ is the only way to eternal life. If you trust in Jesus receiving God's salvation by grace alone, then you will be in heaven. If you resist trusting in Jesus, then you will be in hell. That is what God tells us in the Bible. Jesus said:

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son (John 3:18).

However, only God knows if a person has truly believed or not.

2. By condemning others on minor matters

Remember we are to wisely judge in the sense of being discriminating, but we are not to be sinfully judgmental in condemning another person. Remember the Greek word for judging, krino, can be used in both senses. Paul used krino in the sense of condemning when he said:

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day (Colossians 2:16).

Just as it is today, religious people love to judge others based on their own rules. The Bible does not speak directly to the issue of whether or not you should eat pork or drink alcohol or whether or not you must worship on Sunday or celebrate Easter and Christmas as holidays. And yet religious people want to appoint themselves as the spiritual police to condemn others who do not see the issue as they do.

God said not to judge each other over minor matters. Paul addressed a hot minor issue in his day -- should you eat meat that was sacrificed to an idol? (1 Corinthians 14) Paul said:

You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat (Romans 14:10).

His point was that God will be our judge on these kinds of minor matters. One of us may be wrong or both of us, and we will find out one day, but for now, keep your convictions on minor matters personal. Do not condemn others on minor matters. Some Christians play Texas Hold Um poker; others see it as sinful gambling. Some moms stay home; others work outside the home. Some parents choose home school, some public school, and some private school.

Some choose to get vaccinated, and others refuse. The Bible does give a direct command on these issues, so we are free to disagree. Do not be judgmental either by assuming the place of God to issue a verdict or by condemning others on minor matters.

DO JUDGE

While we must avoid distasteful judgmentalism, perhaps the more significant problem in our culture is the hesitation to judge at all. We are taught by our culture that we are wrong to judge anyone for anything. We are just supposed to avert our eyes. We are to live and let live.

Today the debate over marriage is bringing out the charge, "don't judge." If two people of the same sex want to live together as permanent partners, who are you to say they cannot be married? The point here is not the merit of your point of view, but whether you have the standing to even have a point of view on the morality of same-sex marriage. Remember before we can be tolerant, we must first disagree, but to disagree we must determine our point of view, which is to make a judgment. God calls us to use our minds and his written revelation in the Bible to judge.

1. Truth vs. Error

We are supposed to evaluate what we are told against the Word of God. Paul commended the Bereans for doing just that:

Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true (Acts 17:11).

Paul applauded the Bereans for evaluating his own messages against God's Scripture. God wants you to judge what you hear against the Word of God. John was even stronger in his command:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world (1 John 4:1).

When you hear preachers on TV, radio or the Internet, do not believe everything they say. Do not be naïve and gullible. The better speaker the person is, the more you should be careful. Do not believe a book you read just because it comes from a Christian bookstore. Judge what you read and hear

based on the Word of God. Use the mind that God gave you to judge truth from error with the Word of God that he gave you.

When you are in a leadership role, it is appropriate to deal with people when they are teaching something counter to the Word of God. The New Testament tells us to rebuke people so they will be sound in the faith (Titus 1:13).

2. Goodness vs. Evil

God wants you to make moral judgments. We are to grow in our knowledge of God's Word so we can make distinctions between good and evil. The book of Hebrews says:

Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil (Hebrews 5:13-14).

You should make moral judgments distinguishing right from wrong. Paul prayed for the Philippians:

So that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ (Philippians 1:10b).

Contrary to what our culture teaches us, we are to stand for what is morally good and oppose what is morally evil. It is wrong to portray an erotic image of the human body, and calling it art does not change its immorality. It is wrong to cheat on the test even if you are about to fail the class. It is wrong to break your marriage vow because you found someone you like better.

When you see your close friend in sin, at times you should approach them and point out their sin. Jesus said: "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over" (Matthew 18:15; see also Galatians 6:1-2; 1 Thessalonians 5:14).

Of course, those of you who have tried to do this know that it is very common to run up against the favorite push back: "Who are you to judge?" God calls us to make judgments about truth and goodness. However, when you wonder if you should bring up a difficult situation with your friend, you raise a whole new set of issues.

Should you judge or not? What does God say? Judge without being judgmental. Avoid sinful judgmentalism that condemns others, but embrace wise judging that discriminates truth from error and good from evil. Do not

assume the place of God to issue ultimate verdicts and do not condemn others over minor matters. But muster the courage to stand against our culture and judge truth and goodness based on the Word of God.

*Christ Fellowship's views on this subject are guided by the authoritative Word of God.
Not all biblical references in the Word of God relating to each principle are listed.
Biblical references quoted are from the New International Version (NIV) 2011 unless otherwise noted.*