When Is it Right to Judge Others?

Michael d'Offay 8 February 2018



Jesus says, 'Judge not, that you be not judged' (Matthew 7:1). In this article, I want to argue that there are times when Christians are to judge others. Jesus followers are reluctant to do this in the church today, yet even the secular media are quick to judge what they see as sin – for example with the sexual abuse and #MeToo scandal in Hollywood. Too often, in misunderstanding Jesus' words, Christians tiptoe around the elephant in the room that causes broken relationships and conflict.

Judge Others

The clearest Scripture endorsing the judgment of others is found in 1 Corinthians 5:12, which says, 'For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?' Paul is telling the church to excommunicate a member who is sleeping with his father's wife. His unrepentant sin is outward, ongoing, serious and it scandalises their witness to their community. Paul tells them to discern the situation and call the person out for willfully abusing the grace of God.

We have no right to judge the world (since God will do that), but we are to judge those inside the church. This means leaders in church life are called to safeguard the integrity of the church by gently and patiently addressing and correcting erring saints. So, the New Testament idea of

judging refers to the act of discerning right from wrong and being able to carefully call out sinful behaviour when it damages God's glory, causes conflict in our relationships, and is divisive in the church.

Judge Not

But isn't Paul contradicting what Jesus commanded in Matthew 7:1, 'Judge not, that you be not judged'? In other words, does Jesus say we can't point out faults in another person? No, Jesus tells us we can 'take the speck out of our brother's eye', but we must first take the log out of our own eye. In Matthew 18, Christ reinforces this idea when he instructs us, if there is someone who sins against you, 'go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone'. Clearly Jesus is not against us pointing out faults in others (which is what judging involves). It is how it is done that is vital. In Matthew 7, Christ is taking aim at those who have a judgmental, self-righteous and critical attitude, those who are quick to find fault and shoot off unchecked correction. So, there are times, with careful consideration in understanding the situation and examining ourselves, that we must judge.

Removing the Log from My Own Eye

So, before we have the right to correct a fellow believer, we first have to consider ourselves. In an astounding text, Paul in 1 Timothy 1:15 tells us that 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.' He says this while serving as an apostle. In other words, Paul didn't think of himself as better than others. For me, this means I must acknowledge that there is sin dwelling in me (a log in my eye) and see myself as a worse sinner than the person I am confronting. Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it this way, 'If my sinfulness appears to me to be in any way smaller or less detestable in comparison with the sins of others, I am still not recognising my sinfulness at all. My sin is of necessity the worst, the most grievous, the most reprehensible.' [1]

This is not some pious false humility, but a genuine attitude of considering that person better than me (see Philippians 2:3). As Thomas à Kempis said, 'Never think that thou hast made any progress till thou look upon thyself as inferior to all.'

Seeking Out Correction

We are called, in love, to speak into each other's lives and learn to look for correction. I am part of a church culture that does this and I have seen it produce a healthy, safe and loving environment where people are open to being corrected, and even seek it out.

We mustn't be scared as individual Christians to deal with offence and sin when we see it in our church communities. After all, this is what love does.

[1] Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. Life Together. Hymns Ancient and Modern Ltd. Kindle Edition.