

The Importance of Righteous Judgment

We live in a society that is plagued by poor judgment. One does not have to look far into our judicial systems to see how bad the situation is. I am sure that you will remember the well-publicized case of the woman who successfully sued McDonald's for an incident in which she spilled hot coffee on her lap. Here was a responsible adult who made a conscious decision to place a cup of coffee on her lap while driving. Yes, it is unfortunate that this lady suffered scalds as a result; but was her decision to place the coffee cup on her lap really the fault of the McDonald's company? Would she have purchased the coffee in the first place if it were lukewarm? Of course not! As a costly result of her poor judgment, many companies have been forced to follow McDonald's response in double-cupping their hot drinks or in publishing warnings that the tea and coffee they sell is very hot.

Bill Clinton, former president of the United States clearly demonstrated to the world how poor his judgment was. He repeatedly made a mockery of the U.S. judicial system, of his exalted public office, and of the country that he represented. It is even sadder when one realizes that this man's actions represented a fairly accurate manifestation of a good cross-section of the North American people.

Judgment is an interesting aspect of the human experience, and it is a necessary fact of life. We all make judgments every day of our lives. I challenge our readers to try to live just one day without making a single judgment. This would be all but impossible for any conscious human being. We must logically ask ourselves why this is so. If we arrive at the correct answer, we might be surprised to find that judgment has been built into us by our Creator, and for a very specific purpose. The important thing is that we can and should glorify God by learning what the specific purpose of judgment is, and by learning to use it wisely.

There are many aspects of judgment in the Bible and you may be sure that there is enough material on it to fill many sermons and many articles. Therefore, in the space available, I would like to show you – from God's Word – the importance of righteous judgment and how it applies to a Christian's life.

What is judgment?

When you hear the word, "judgment," a variety of things may come to mind. The word seems to carry a negative connotation, especially in our hypersensitive western culture, which has grown to be overly heavy with regard for individual human rights.

So just what is judgment? According to Webster's College Dictionary, judgment is defined as:

**The act of judging, or deciding,
A legal decision order, decree, or sentence given by a judge or a law court,
The ability to come to opinions about things,
The power of comparing and deciding.**

We will refer to this type of judgment as *human judgment* because, when using it, one is judging according to his natural, human mind and intellect.

The word "judgmental" is defined as:

Making or tending to make judgments as to value or importance that are considered to be lacking in tolerance, compassion, and objectivity.

The word "judge" and derivatives of it (e.g. judging, judgment, and justice) appear over 750 times in the King James Version of the Bible. This is a strong indication that, to God, judgment is a very large and important subject. Let us take a look then at some of the patterns and principles about judgment that appear in God's Word.

God always judges with righteousness.

First, we need to understand the difference between human judgment and righteous judgment. As mentioned above, human judgments are those that we make using our own minds and intellects. Every human being develops this form of judgment naturally as they grow. However, as we look around in society and, as we have already seen, it is painfully obvious that Satan's influence has created a great deal of *bad* human judgment!

On the other hand, God's people are blessed to have righteous judgment. But what *is* righteous judgment? Here are three quotations that deal with God's judgment which, of course, is always righteous:

God is a just judge, and God is angry with the wicked every day. (Psalms 7:11 NKJV)

In the ninth psalm, David praises God for His righteous judgment:

He judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with equity. (Psalm 9:8 NRSV)

Jumping all the way over to the book of Revelation:

And I heard the altar respond, "Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty, your judgments are true and just!" (Revelation 16:7 NRSV)

Righteous judgment is *the* greatest form of judgment because its very foundation is God's law and truth. God is very faithful in the patterns that He has set for us, so this should come as no surprise to us. Conversely, God's law and truth *must* be the basis and guide for all of our thinking. Since all of God's judgments are righteous, we too must learn how to judge righteously in preparation for our future roles in His Kingdom. But more on this later. Part of righteous judgment is choosing God's commandments rather than man's:

But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; (Acts 4:19 NRSV)

It is clear that righteous judgment cannot be attained without the indwelling of the Spirit of God. Every judgment situation is unique and, as a good portion of these situations are not "black or white," we need to understand how to apply God's law to each case. One day in the temple, Jesus advised the Jews that righteous judgment is the opposite of judging by appearance:

Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment. (John 7:24 NKJV)

On another occasion, Jesus also told them that judging by appearance is the same as judging according to the flesh:

The Pharisees therefore said to Him, "You bear witness of yourself; your witness is not true." Jesus answered and said to them, "Even if I bear witness of myself, my witness is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from and where I am going. You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one. And yet if I do judge, my judgment is true; for I am not alone, but I am with the Father who sent me. (John 8:13-16 NKJV)

Here we see the Pharisees judging according to the flesh. They accuse Jesus of not being a true witness. Jesus responds that He does not (at that time) judge anyone and, even if He did, it would be fine because any judgment of His would be true (He *is* truth, after all! John 14:6) and He had the backing of His heavenly Father. He tells them that their judgment, on the other hand, is according to the flesh – that is, by human standards or judgment.

Fair, equitable and impartial judgment

God's requirement for fair, equitable and impartial judgment is a recurring theme throughout His Word. Here are three examples:

You must not be partial in judging; hear out the small and the great alike; you shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's. (Deuteronomy 1:17 NRSV)

If we err at all in our judgment, we must err in favour of the underprivileged:

Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy. (Proverbs 31:9 NRSV)

James even calls such favour, "pure and undefiled religion before God" (James 1:27).

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice [KJV: judgment] and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. (Matthew 23:23 NKJV)

These three items – righteous judgment, mercy and faith – are a matter of law. The *weightier* matters of God's law!

God's approach the same in both Testaments

The scriptures that we have examined so far show God's righteous judgment to be the same throughout man's history. This makes logical sense as the purpose of judgment is to always be ultimately in the best interest of the people. Here are some more scriptures which compare righteous judgment in different time periods. First, looking ahead into the future day of God's judgment:

But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. (Romans 2:5 NRSV)

Those who desire God to temper His judgment with mercy in that day must exercise the same in their own lives now. James agrees with Paul on this:

For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. (James 2:13 NRSV)

Now, looking back into the Old Testament period:

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; (Zechariah 7:9 NRSV)

Judgment is a very powerful tool, but mercy always wins out. Yes, in the Old Testament period too. In context of judgment, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

We need to learn righteous judgment

The evidence that we have seen so far indicates that for us to understand how to apply mercy in our judgments is an almost overwhelming task. In comparison to God, we are at quite a disadvantage, because He knows the heart and whether the person being judged has truly repented. It is so easy for us – yes, even for God’s children – to judge falsely because we tend to keep reverting to our own, human judgment.

Nevertheless, the development and learning how to exercise righteous judgment is a lifelong process on which every Christian must embark. While we are still human, we cannot expect to attain perfection in it. Thankfully, even in God’s righteous judgment of our imperfect efforts at righteous judgment, He is merciful and fair. He has not commanded us to practice righteous judgment without showing us how. Like the world’s best instructors, God teaches by example. He is our great Teacher (John 13:13-14) and He has even given us a "user-friendly user’s manual" to help us. We just need to sign up for His Righteous Judgment training course by asking Him to teach us:

Teach me good judgment and knowledge, for I believe in your commandments. (Psalms 119:66 NRSV)

We could substitute the word *good*, in this verse, with the word *righteous*. The Hebrew word is *tuwb*, and can be rendered as the English word *fair*.

My soul yearns for you in the night, my spirit within me earnestly seeks you. For when your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness. (Isaiah 26:9 NRSV)

As God's judgments, by design, have a teaching function built into them, we are able to use them as our model and to internalize His judgments as our guide in life. Adam and Eve were instructed personally by God Himself. They had all the information necessary to make good decisions, but they failed to live by God’s teachings and to emulate His righteous judgments. If we will learn to judge righteously – imitating the way God judges – we will make Him very happy

Why do we need righteous judgment?

We have established that we need righteous judgment. But we really should know the amazing reason why! We have already seen that judgment is very important to God. What is important to Him must also be important to us.

But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God. (I Corinthians 4:3-5 NRSV)

Yes, the Lord – Jesus Christ – has been appointed by His Father as the Supreme Judge (Acts 10:42). However, we are begotten members of the God family and, when we are born again as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, we will assist Him in His judgment responsibilities:

Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels--to say nothing of ordinary matters? (I Corinthians 6:2-3 NRSV)

What a mind-boggling promise this is! We must be learning to judge now because one day we will have a part in judging the world... even in judging the very angels! There are many other scriptures that clearly illustrate that we will be executing judgment under Christ in the Kingdom of God.

Application for the Christian's life

Finally, let us look at how we are to judge now – during our physical sojourn – while we are in our training period for our roles as judges in the World Tomorrow. Here are a few important words of caution before we continue:

- We must be very careful not to appoint ourselves as "policemen" or to try to take to ourselves the responsibility and authority to try to correct every perceived problem and sin that we may be aware of, both in and out of the church.
- We must, when dealing with those not in the church, strive to be positive, balanced examples of God's way of life.
- We must be able to separate the behaviour from the person. When a parent scolds their child by telling him, "You are a bad boy," usually, the boy (or girl!) is not really so very bad. It is the behaviour they are exhibiting that is bad. There is a vast difference in making a judgment about a behaviour and making a judgment about a person. Although this is sometimes hard to do, we should remember Jesus' example and the old adage: Hate the sin, but love the sinner!

The first point in this section is the matter of proper timing – knowing just when to speak out in righteous judgment. Solomon tells us that there is:

A time to keep silence, and a time to speak. (Ecclesiastes 3:7)

In the realm of righteous judgment, there are times when we should speak out and there are times when we should hold our tongues. Knowing when to speak and when not to speak is a matter of judgment in itself. Perhaps the person with the perceived problem is not yet ready to hear about it. This, of course, does not mean that we should fail to fulfil our proper, loving responsibilities to our brothers and sisters. However, if the problem is not life threatening, there may be wise reasons to defer direct mention of it until a more opportune time. As the appropriate time may not arrive until after a long wait, much patience may be required. In this regard, let us take another look at I Corinthians 4:5:

Therefore do not pronounce judgement before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

Paul advises that the right time to speak out may not come at all in this lifetime. It may have to wait until after the return of our Chief Judge.

Judge not?

Here is a well-known example from chapter 7 of Matthew's gospel account, which covers the development and proper use of righteous judgment. Beginning with verse 1:

Judge not, that you be not judged.

The word *judge* (Greek: *krino*) might be better translated *condemn* here. By changing this word to *condemn*, the context of this passage takes on a somewhat different – somewhat harsher – meaning. The word *condemn* is defined as:

**Pass an adverse judgment on,
Disapprove of strongly,
Declare guilty of wrongdoing,
Convict,
Pass judicial sentence on,
Inflict a penalty upon,
Doom,
Declare unfit for use or service.**

The apostle Paul captures this idea of condemnatory judging in Romans 2:1:

Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.

Moving on to verse 2 of Matthew 7:

For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.

Here, the word *judgment* (Greek: *krima*) might also be better translated as *condemnation*. This fits the context perfectly and emphasizes the point that Christ was trying to drive home. God is telling you and I that here that, if we display a condemning attitude, the same will be measured back to us. This is the reciprocal principle of cause and effect. We reap what we sow. If we sow condemnation, we will reap condemnation. Now, on to verse 3:

And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?

Upon closer examination of this verse's key words, some interesting things come to light. The word, "look" is defined as:

**Make use of the sense of sight;
Direct one's eyes in order to see;
Direct one's attention mentally upon something; or to try to see or find something.**

Looking involves moving one's eyes in a specific direction. At the beginning of this verse, Jesus asks the question "Why do you look?" The implied message here is that the person who is doing the looking is not looking in the right place and that his focus may be all wrong.

We can often tend to be self-righteous in our judgments. It is much easier for us to see flaws in others than it is to see them in ourselves. Therefore, it is so easy for us to take our own sins lightly and to be heavier on others. Jesus is showing us here that we must concentrate on our own sins first, before we go trying to help others with theirs.

The word, "speck" is defined as a:

**Small spot, mark, or stain,
Very small bit,
Particle.**

Here, Jesus emphasizes that we usually nit-pick and go after the little things. Is it really our position to worry about the little things that others may be doing wrong?

On now to the word, "plank" (KJV: beam), which is a long, broad, thick board. This is an interesting definition, as a beam is something that supports or sustains – as in the example of a door lintel.



Door Lintel

We tend to ignore the huge beams in our own eyes, and we allow them to support and sustain our own sins! We are beginning to appreciate the main point that Christ is trying to make here... that we must first focus on ourselves! Now verse 4:

Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye?

The word, "remove" is a somewhat poor and weak English translation of the Greek word "ekballo" which really carries a lot more power and force. The Greek usage emphasizes the following, all with the notion of much force and violence:

**Cast or cast out,
Bring forth or send forth,
Drive out,
Pull out,
Draw out,
Tear out.**

Here, Christ is pointing out the irony of the situation. How can one have the nerve to say to another person that he is doing something wrong? The notion of force and violence indicates the seriousness that God wants us to have when we approach our own sins. Verse 5:

Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

This verse is pretty scary! We can almost hear Jesus Christ raising his voice and snapping out the word, "Hypocrite!" This is a real attention-grabber. A hypocrite is someone who puts on a mask of false virtue or religion, and does not practice what they preach. Paul warns us:

**Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God?
(Romans 2:3 NRSV)**

In this case, the persons to whom Jesus is talking are making a show of preaching righteousness, but they are not righteous themselves. They are in fact *self*-righteous.

Again, how easy it is to point out flaws in others, especially those who are not members of God’s church. Isn’t it so easy for us to condemn those in the world?

The word "first" denotes Jesus' order of importance. Before all else, we must take care of our own sins before worrying about those of others. God is demanding that the focus be shifted to the self. By removing the planks from our own eyes first, we will receive the key to seeing clearly. And what is that key? We have already seen that it is mercy. With true mercy, we will understand that the other person's sin is, in all probability, not as monumental as we at first thought. A merciful person who, after many struggles, has overcome a serious sin in his own life, realizes how tough it was to beat that sin and, in turn, extends mercy to another person who is struggling with his own sin. When we come to know God's law more deeply and more intimately, the ability to see clearly is a wonderful gift. Continuing in verse 6:

Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces.

There is a enormous lesson here for us even though, at first glance, it appears that Jesus has moved on from His subject of righteous judgment. Let us briefly examine a few of the key words in this verse. First, the word "pearls." The Greek word is "margarites" and in its singular form it can mean:

A pearl,
A treasure.
Something of importance,
A proverb, i.e. a word of great value.

This latter meaning could be referring to the precious offering of wisdom in helping us overcome a sin – hence, righteous judgment. Next, the word "trample" (Greek: katapateo), which means:

Trample down,
Tread down,
Tread underfoot.
Figuratively, to reject with disdain,

Jesus uses the word in this latter meaning: to treat with rudeness and insult, to spurn, and to treat with insulting neglect. We are getting the picture that speaking out in righteous judgment could be dangerous and that we should approach it with great caution.

Finally, the word "swine." How many of our readers are familiar with the viciousness of pigs? My father tells an amusing story about when he was a boy, growing up on a farm where he and a foul-tempered rooster did not get along too well. One day, the rooster chased him across the farmyard and, as my father was running, it maliciously pecked his rear end! Dad was so mad that, later in the day when the rooster was sleeping on the fence of the pigpen, he crept up to his enemy and scared the living daylight out of it. But the rooster fell into the pigpen and, with feathers flying everywhere, the pigs quickly devoured it!

Picture yourself in the unlikely situation of confidently walking up to a pig-sty, with the good intention of feeding – not scraps – but some valuable, expertly prepared food items to the hungry inhabitants. As you enter the sty and begin feeding the pigs, you lose your footing and the pigs devour *you!* In the Bible, pigs and dogs represent the heathen, the Gentiles, the unclean and – in our day – the unconverted. In His illustration, Jesus is teaching us that the righteous judgment of His brothers and sisters is something very precious and holy; also that approaching someone about a sin is very risky business... so risky that we had better be prepared for a reaction. We may win over the person, or they may turn on us and rip us to pieces.

If righteous judgment is so dangerous then, perhaps we should just play it safe and give up on it? No. Christ is not letting us off the hook with this. As we have already seen, God has given His people a solemn responsibility to be learning righteous judgment and, in a respectful manner, to be our brothers' keepers. But we must be sure that we know – in advance – what we are doing. Jesus Christ admonishes us to use wisdom in exercising judgment. It is not something that can be taken lightly. Prayer, preparation and timing are all of the utmost importance. There is definitely a time to bring up an issue and there are times when we know that the person is not ready to be confronted about it. Also, we must realize that in some cases – perhaps even in *most* cases – the situation may have no bearing on us and it may well not be our place to judge. Let us keep mercy and love – which covers a multitude of sins – in the forefront of our minds.

Righteous judgment is not something that is going to come to us overnight. It will take a lifetime of learning and practice to understand it, appreciate it and perfect it. As in all things, we must be emulating Jesus Christ and be asking God daily for His assistance and the power of His Spirit in doing so.

Therefore, when you judge; judge with righteous judgment!

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