

LESSONS FROM CORINTHIANS

Matthew 7:1-5, 15-20; Romans 16:17-19; 1 Corinthians 4:1-5; 5:1-5, 12-13; Galatians 6:1

What the Bible says about judging can leave us confused. Should we judge or shouldn't we? When you read words of Jesus and Paul, each says that there are times when we are to judge and times when we are not. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says that we are not to judge lest we be judged. Then a few verses later, He tells us to judge fruit to determine if a prophet is false. Likewise, with Paul, in 1 Corinthians 5 when talking about the immoral man in the church, Paul says that he had passed judgment on the man and the church should as well. But earlier in chapter 4, he tells the Corinthians to judge nothing before the appointed time. So, are we to judge or not judge? The answer is "yes."

I often hear people say, "We are not to judge"—meaning never ever. That is true sometimes. But it is not true other times. We cannot make a blanket statement that we are never to judge. Knowing what to do depends on the scriptural context. Those outside of the church accuse us of judging and being judgmental, whether we are or not. Certainly, there are those who help give us that reputation. So, how are we to understand the matter of "judging?"

The subject of judging surfaces several places in the text of 1 Corinthians. What I want to do is to look at those passages as well as Jesus's words from the Sermon on the Mount to see what we can learn about judging. As I studied these passages together I saw something that I had not noted before. I realized that judging—whether to or not—is tied to the matter of "qualification." Are we qualified to judge or not qualified to judge? And the way to know if we are qualified or not is either explicit or implicit in the text. So, I want us to see as we make this study that the question is not really "Do I judge or do I not judge? but "Am I qualified to judge?" The answer to that last question is determined by qualification.

Judging is a necessary function in society. There will be judging in the upcoming Olympics. There is civil judging in the courts. Teachers judge student's work. Judging naturally happens all the time. And it can be positive—even though we tend to think of it as negative. But when are we to judge and when are we not to judge according to scripture? Again, I think the answer is tied to the matter of qualification. Let's see what I mean by that.

We begin with Jesus's statements in the Sermon on the Mount.

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" [Matthew 7:1-5].

Did Jesus tell us in this passage to suspend all critical faculties? No. That would be absolutely disastrous. Did He tell us to turn a blind eye to sin and wrong? No. He did not do that and does not expect us to. Did He tell us to ignore the speck in our brother's eye? No. In fact He said **"then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" [Matthew 7:5].**

So, what is Jesus saying here in this passage on judgment? He did not say, "Don't judge." He is saying don't judge when you are not qualified. Judging here is tied to qualification. Hypocrites are not qualified to judge others. Realize the absurdity of pointing a finger at a speck of dust in another's eye [a fault] when you have an obvious laundry list of faults. That isn't even the pot calling the kettle black. It is far worse than that. To do that is to be a hypocrite. Hypocrisy renders us unqualified to be a judge. Jesus confronted sin and was never called a hypocrite. He was without sin and fault. What happens when we, as hypocrites, judge others, is that we get the same kind of judgment in return.

We usually conclude that our acts are not as bad as the acts of our neighbor, which gives us the prerogative of judging him. I am okay and you are not or my sin is not as bad as yours. Having that kind of attitude makes us hypocrites.

Notice what Jesus said about our brother. He does have a speck in his eye. And we are responsible for helping him in his weakness. But we can't do that when we are hypocrites. We are not qualified. We cannot help an erring brother when our attitude is arrogant and self-righteous. Our sin must always be greater to us than the sin of our brother. Sadly, the reverse is usually true. We see our sin as the speck and the sin of our brother as the log. We cannot help him unless we reverse the ratio. Our sin in comparison to his becomes a plank to his speck. When we admit and confess our great sin and see the great need we have of grace, then we can become qualified to judge and help our brother. When we see a sin/fault in our brother's life it should trigger something in us. We should become more conscious of our sin and weakness. When we do and deal with our sin first, then we can be qualified to help our brother.

You see, Jesus is not saying here not to judge. He is saying don't attempt it when you are a hypocrite. It comes down to the matter of qualification.

This agrees in spirit with what Paul said in his letter to the Galatians.

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently [Galatians 6:1].

The spiritual person goes to an erring brother not as a hypocrite but one who has the attitude that Jesus said was required to make a judgment and help someone else with his sin.

Therefore, this passage in the Sermon on the Mount that is used over and over as people's fodder for not judging, is actually saying don't judge when you are not qualified.

A few verses later in the sermon, Jesus speaks of judging again.

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them [Matthew 7:15-16].

It can be difficult to immediately recognize false prophets because their inner character is hidden. They are actually wolves but are dressed like sheep. Therefore, they appear to be harmless. So, what are we to do? We are to judge what we can see not what we can't see—the fruit of their lives, which reveals what they really are. How can we make that judgment? We have to be qualified. When we know the scripture, when we know the truth about Jesus, when we have the Holy Spirit to help us with discernment, we have what we need to be qualified to judge the fruit of their lives. In John 10 Jesus talks about true and false shepherds. There the false shepherd is distinguished by his own self-interest and lack of love for the sheep. Perhaps the fruit of the false prophet, therefore, is his willingness to exploit others, his use of religion for his own advantage and his lack of self-giving love. When we see that we can make a judgment. Again, judging is tied to qualification for judging. Judgment is not something prohibited. It is something that takes place when we are qualified.

Having looked at those passages where Jesus speaks about judging, we come to the passages in 1 Corinthians where Paul speaks about judging. The first passage is in chapter 4.

So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord Who judges me. Therefore, judge nothing before the appointed them; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God [1 Corinthians 4:1-5].

Paul is continuing to talk here about the divisions around personalities in the church in Corinth. With the "I am for Paul" and "I am for Apollos" groups, there surely was judging going on. I want you to notice that as Paul addresses judging, the bottom line again is the matter of qualification. Paul knew he

would be judged, but it was to come from the one qualified to do it. Paul says that neither the Corinthians nor he himself was qualified to judge him. Why is that? Let's look at the text.

Paul said that he, Apollos, Cephas—apostles, pastors, spiritual leaders at Corinth—were “servants.” That word means “underrower.” The Corinthians would have readily understood this term. They would have known of the war galleys of the Roman Empire that crossed the isthmus of the Ionian and Aegean Seas. On the lowest deck of these war galleys, there was a single row of rowers. In front of the rowers was a raised deck on which the captain stood. He would give the orders to the rowers and they were to do exactly what he said.

Paul continues and says that as underrowers they were entrusted with the secret things of God. So, as underrowers they were stewards. As stewards the underrowers were judged on their faithfulness.

Paul tells the Corinthians that they were not qualified to judge him nor was he qualified to judge himself. Why? Because he belonged to God, was given the trust by God and his judgment, therefore, belonged to God. The Corinthians were not qualified to judge. Why?

- a. Because the servant belonged to God, took orders from Him and determined faithfulness.
- b. Because they could not know all the facts [like Eli with Hannah and Job's friends].
- c. Because they judged on the basis of preference, tastes and comparison with others.
- d. Because they could not see all the way to the end.
- e. Because they were carnal.

Paul was not qualified to judge himself. Why?

- a. Because he could not know all the facts nor see all the way to the end.
- b. He was not impartial.
- c. He could not judge his true faithfulness as God could.

Does this mean there is no room for evaluation by others of a pastor [lack of accountability is not good for the church] or no heart-searching or self-scrutiny by the man himself to seek to improve? No. They are both necessary. But both of these fall short.

My ministry assistant, after coming on staff, asked me when we came to the time of staff evaluations, who evaluated me. “Is it God,” she asked? He most certainly does and will. But others do as well. My evaluation has come from the Personnel Committee. Most recently they have used a 360 approach. They have done a good job with that. But they have felt awkward in doing it. They always expressed that they felt unqualified. And the truth is, as Paul stated here, only God is qualified to really do the judging. There are limitations on the human side for truly making the right judgment.

You need to keep this in mind when your new pastor comes. Understand that you are not hiring him to work for you. God has called him and assigned him to work in this field and build this spiritual building. You are not qualified to truly judge him, because no one understands this role but the person in the role and God who put him there. You cannot know what it takes to do a message every week, year end and year out, to feel the spiritual weight of being responsible for delivering the Word of God, for watching over the souls of men, for agonizing over decisions, the pain and toll of burying friends in the flock, etc. You judge mostly by what you see. There is much that is not seen. The measurement of faithfulness is something that only God can do. Again, judging properly is tied to the matter of qualification. Pray for him, support him, go easy on the judging because he will be assigned a weighty task.

There is one last situation that Paul addresses that gives us two more statements about judging.

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among the pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present [1 Corinthians 5:1-3].

Paul previously talked about not judging. Now he says that he has already passed judgment on this person. What is the difference between the two situations? The difference is qualification. Both Paul

and the Corinthian congregation knew what was morally right and wrong because of the revelation of Scripture. They knew that what this man was persistently doing was sin and also knew the danger of letting sin [yeast] remain in the body of believers. They were qualified to make this judgment and discipline this man. So, they were to act and were guilty if they did not.

Tied in with this situation are the last two verses in the chapter.

What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside [1 Corinthians 5:12-13].

Again, the matter rests on qualification. We are qualified to make judgment within the church but unqualified to do it outside the church. Only God is truly capable of doing that. He is the only One Who fully understands His mercy, His grace, His justice, the wheat and tares, etc. So what do we do? We are to make sure that we judge ourselves within the church and leave the judgment of the world to God. We have plenty to do when it comes to ourselves. But the reverse is usually true. We are big into judging the world [outside the church] and do little judging or a poor job of judging [for the purposes and correction and restoration] within the church. We have it backwards. We need to judge when and where we are qualified to judge.

So, in summary, we see that judging is tied to qualification. Use the matter of qualification as your guide. If you are not qualified, don't do it. When you are qualified, be careful and be led by God. Judging is tricky business for us and we tend to mess it up.

Folks, do not minimize the issue of judgment. It is a part of the Christian life. We should ask God to help us clearly see our lives in light of His truth and be willing to be molded by the great Potter. We also should be open to help for needed correction from our brothers who are qualified.

If you do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, understand that you are under the judgment of God because of your unforgiven sin. Accept His gracious offer of salvation now.