

Responding to Misuse of “Judge Not..”

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“Judge not” (Matthew 7:1-2) is perhaps the favorite Scripture scrap of our culture. But it is a scrap, torn off of a larger sentence. Without the rest of that sentence (and the rest of the Bible) to give it context, it is hardly as complete a guide to Christian conduct as it is oft made out to be. Judgment is nothing more or less than moral evaluation, which means that the person who responds to, say, a street preacher’s warning with a finger wagging, “Judge not,” has himself just judged the evangelist --- for judging!

Of course the New Testament apostles, every bit as much as the Old Testament prophets, passed all sorts of judgments on all sorts of people. Indeed, their continual call to repentance would be incomprehensible apart from an underlying judgment that something in someone needs changing! Whether it was John the Baptist telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife,” or the apostle Paul judging that the man in Corinth “having” his stepmother must be excommunicated (1 Cor. 5:1-5), they clearly judged the kings and commoners of their communities, and did so without having any idea of disobedience to Christ’s “Judge not.”

“Judge not” is followed by an explanation in triplicate to the question, “Why not?” The rest of the sentence explains: “...that you be not judged, for with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.” The first of the three reasons not to judge, then, is this: “that you be not judged.” So it isn’t as if moral evaluation itself were somehow forbidden. Rather, handling it is like handling a sword that can both harm and protect. Judgment is like the pitch-back boys use to practice baseball: whatever you throw in bounces right back at you. We remember King David’s judgment of the rich man in Nathan’s “report” who’d devoured a poor man’s lamb, how David said angrily, “the man who has done this deserves to die...” and how the prophet pitched the king’s words right back, saying, “You are the man” (2 Sam 12). David had stolen not a cherished lamb but a cherished wife; and if the theft of a lamb warranted death, the king had declared himself worthy of capital punishment. Your assessment of crime by and punishment due your neighbor will both alike be applied to you, says Jesus.

He makes this clear in two further statements. First, He says, “...with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged.” So, it is only dangerous for a John the Baptist to judge a Herod for taking up with his brother Philip’s wife

if John is committing the same sin with his own brother’s wife. In other words, don’t be a hypocrite.

Now, a secondary aspect of judgment as moral evaluation is the calculation of just penalties for clear sins. It is perhaps to this question of what penalty a correctly identified sin attracts that Jesus refers when He says, “With the measure you use it shall be measured to you” (Matt. 7:2; c.f. John 7:24). To return to our example from 1 Corinthians, if Paul measures out the drastic corrective of excommunication to the sin of cohabitating with one’s stepmother, then he should expect the same measure of discipline if ever he were caught in the same sin with his own stepmother. In such cases the judgment you mete out in saying, “You deserve _____!” should be nothing more or less than what biblically accrues to the crime committed.

Considered from that angle, the entire verse is in part an application of the rule, “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” This is also a key consideration at the outset of any evaluation, for it is one thing to judge the biblical standard of sin and its earthly consequences but quite another to be sure the one thus accused is guilty as charged. To that end, He gives us strict standards for evidence. In biblical trials there was always the standard of “two or three witnesses” (Matt. 18:16; Deut. 19:15). If the accused is maligned based on mere rumors and assumptions, Jesus’ warning should inspire great caution. Judge apart from evidence and your own loose standards will certainly bounce back and hit you with similar treatment.

There is much more that could be said on this subject, and perhaps this article will be expanded to answer any questions that may come in, but the goal of this response is to dissolve the typical tripe that imagines Jesus commanded us to entirely suspend moral evaluation with the words, “Judge not...” He did not.

Suggested Reading:

Sri, Edward. *Who Am I to Judge? Responding to Relativism with Logic and Love*. Ignatius Press, 2016.