



LIFE APPLICATIONS “1 CORINTHIANS”

Chapter 4

AVOID JUDGMENTALISM

Have you ever expressed disagreement with a person’s position, or disapproval of a particular type of behavior, and one of your friends responded, “How can you be so judgmental? Didn’t Jesus say you shouldn’t judge people?”

Many people are familiar with Jesus’ warning to the individuals about judgmentalism:

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? 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? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:1-5; Luke 6:37-42)

What does Jesus mean when He says to “judge not?” Does He mean that we should never disagree with people, or disapprove of certain behaviors or attitudes?

If you look at the verses that follow this statement in Matthew chapter seven, we can see that our Lord is not telling us to abandon the necessity to judge between right and wrong: He warns against wasting what is sacred on people who reject it (7:6); against false prophets (7:15); and even against those who work miracles but do not serve God (7:21-23). As you can see, Jesus was not encouraging His followers to tolerate evil and error. Instead, Jesus is telling His followers that they should avoid judging erroneously, or judging with the wrong motives or for the wrong reasons (He is also warning against being a hypocrite, which we discuss in another article). In other words, He is telling His followers to avoid judgmentalism, while at the same time exercising discernment.

At first it may seem that judgmentalism and discernment are simply two words for the same behavior; in reality, they are actually two very different things. Seeing what the Church teaches can help you avoid being judgmental, while also being able to discern and avoid accepting destructive beliefs and practices.

First, the Church very strongly warns us against judging others. The Holy Apostle James puts our judgmentalism into perspective: “There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another (James 4:12)?” Only God is judge of the whole world (Romans 3:6), because only He knows the motives of a person’s heart (1 Corinthians 4:5; Romans 2:16).

St. Dorotheos of Gaza, a sixth century monk, explains this principle:

A man can know nothing about the judgments of God. He alone is the One Who takes account of all and is able to judge the hearts of each one of us, as He alone is our Master. Truly it happens that a man may do a certain thing (which seems to be wrong) out of simplicity, and there may be something about it which makes more amends to God than your whole life; how are you going to sit in judgment and constrict your own soul? And should it happen that he has fallen away, how do you know how much and how well he fought, how much blood he sweated before he did it? Perhaps so little fault can be found in him that God can look on his action as if it were just, for God looks on his labor and all the struggle he had before he did it, and has pity on him. And you know this, and what God has spared him for, are you going to condemn him for, and ruin your own soul? And how do you know what tears he has shed about it before God? You may well know about the sin, but you do not know about the repentance.

Because we do not have God's ability to see into a person's heart, we should not judge other people. St. Macarius the Great, one of the Desert Fathers of the fourth century, advises us, "Christians should judge no one, neither an open harlot, nor sinners, nor dissolute people, but should look upon all with simplicity of soul and a pure eye. Purity of heart, indeed, consists in seeing sinful and weak men and having compassion for them and being merciful."

Judgmentalism is a form of sinful pride: you judge others because you think you are better than them. The solution to this problem, according to the saints, is to focus on your own failings instead of the failings of those around you. St. Ambrose of Optina, a nineteenth century Russian saint, tells us, "You need to pay such close attention to your own internal life, that you not focus on what is happening around you. Then you will not condemn." Another nineteenth century Russian saint, Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow, similarly says, "He who sufficiently knows and judges himself has no time to judge others."

Lorenzo Scupoli, a sixteenth century Christian, sums up this approach to yourself and others:

Never allow yourself boldly to judge your neighbor; judge and condemn no one...rather have compassion and pity for him, but let his example be a lesson in humility to you; realizing that you too are extremely weak and as easily moved to sin as dust on the road, say to yourself: 'He fell today, but tomorrow I shall fall.'

At the same time, while we avoid judging people themselves, we should not necessarily ignore (and certainly not accept) the evil that they do. St. Isaac the Syrian, the sixth century bishop of Ninevah (now Mosul in modern Iraq), makes a statement that may sound familiar to you: "Love sinners, but hate their works; and do not despise them for their faults, lest you be tempted by the same trespasses." We are called by God to love the people, but hate their sins and avoid committing them ourselves.

The key to identifying, avoiding, and overcoming sins is discernment - the ability to know the difference between good and bad. St. John Cassian, a French saint of the fourth-fifth centuries, explains that discernment is vital for a Christian: "What, I ask, could be more dangerous or awkward than for a man to lose his power of judging of goodness, and his standard and rule of true discernment?"

Discernment is a gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:10). Realizing this is important to avoiding being judgmental: since we are only able to discern the difference between good and evil because we are equipped to do so by the Holy Spirit, we should not think ourselves to be more spiritual or superior to

others. St. John Cassian reminds us, "This is no minor virtue, nor one which can be seized anywhere merely by human effort. It is ours only as a gift from God."

How can we cooperate with God to receive and utilize the gift of discernment? St. Seraphim of Sarov, a Russian saint of the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries, answers,

It is very useful to spend time reading the word of God in solitude and to read the whole Bible with understanding. In return for this exercise alone, without the addition of any other virtuous deeds, the Lord grants man His mercy and fills him with the gift of understanding. When a man provides his soul with the word of God, then he is granted the understanding of what is good and what is evil.