



## Judgmentalism

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One of the ways in which we can best see the shift that has taken place in our culture over the last few decades is by looking at what the culture knows of the Bible. It used to be that the most often quoted and best known Bible verse – both inside and outside the Church – was John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...” But that’s not the case anymore. Now it’s Matthew 7:1: “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” And what’s interesting is that it’s probably quoted most often by non-Christians when they confront *us*. Part of the reason for this is that quote often the world misunderstands what it means to judge better than we do. Judgmentalism has become such a respectable sin for us that we no longer see it for what it is. And in doing that we’ve damaged our witness to the world. Jerry Bridges gives the best definition of judgmentalism that I’ve seen in a long time. He writes:

“The sin of judgmentalism...is often practiced under the guise of being zealous for what is right. It’s obvious that within our conservative evangelical circles there are myriads of opinions on everything from theology to conduct to lifestyle and politics. Not only are there multiple opinions, but we usually assume our opinion is correct. That’s where our trouble with judgmentalism begins. *We equate our opinions with truth.*”

But it’s not just conservative Christians. That’s the ironic thing. The non-Christian who tells us, “Judge not, lest ye be judged,” is usually being very judgmental. My former coworker who belong to Earth First! and who firebombed forest service trucks and sabotaged an 80 foot tall electrical transmission tower in the Oregon Cascades was acting out his judgmentalism. The “Jesus wouldn’t drive and SUV” folks or the “Fur is dead” crowd are being judgmental, not necessarily because Jesus would drive in SUV or because wearing fur is okay (that’s not the point), but because those folks are making a dogmatic and

judgmental statement based on nothing more than their person opinion.

Let me put in terms that those of us here are probably more likely to understand. A lot of us grew up in time when men wore suits to church and women wore nice dresses. A few decades ago that all changed. First the suit-coat disappeared, then the ties, and eventually the slacks were lost in favour of jeans or even shorts. Women started wearing pants. Especially in the case of women, it wasn’t just the change to pants, but skirts started getting a lot shorter and necklines a lot lower (Yes, as a priest, I’m frequently and inadvertently subjected to rather awkward and explicit shows when administering the Communion.) I was pretty young at the time and I remember being told by my parents, as they pointed to some of the older kids whose parents let them dress in the new fashions, “You’ll never go to church looking like that. Would you dress like that if you were invited to have an audience with the Queen?” Well, that all made sense to me.

But you know what? There’s nothing in the Bible that tells us what style of clothes we have to wear to Church. Really the only things that apply are the other statements that have to do with modesty and discretion – but those verses don’t tell that we can’t wear jeans and t-shirts, just that we shouldn’t be dressing in a way that might cause someone else to stumble. The fact is that culture changes. What the Elizabethans wore to church is not at all what I grew up wearing to Church. Twenty years ago most people would have dressed up to meet the President, but that’s not the case anymore. This was really driven home a couple of years ago. A girls’ volleyball team was invited to meet George Bush and he posed for a photo with them. Many people thought it was scandalous that most of the girls were wearing shorts and flip-flops. “How disrespectful!” they said. And yet those girls weren’t trying to be disrespectful. The culture has changed. They didn’t know better. And the real question is: Did they need to know better?

Think about how we sing in church. Most of us probably grew up singing hymns to the accompaniment of an organ. There’s something majestic about that. For me that’s what reverent worship is all about. And yet today most of that’s been replaced by a band and much simpler songs. Some people are very judgmental

about that: “How can they call that worship?” (And you know, that question comes from both sides of the spectrum!) But the fact is that the New Testament doesn’t tell us what instruments to use in worship or what to sing. It just tells us to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Well, that about covers everything. I still prefer the grand music, the theological depth, and the variety of the old hymns – but that’s *my preference* – and not necessarily a Bible-based conviction. There are a lot of shallow and man-centred praise choruses, but there are also a lot of very popular hymns with terrible theology (try looking over the Christmas section of the hymnal sometime!) This is an area where we need to avoid being judgmental.

Or what about things like drinking, smoking, playing cards, watching movies, or dancing? Veronica and I were at a Family Life marriage conference about ten years ago. On one night of the conference you’re supposed to go out with your spouse for a date: a romantic dinner and all that. We went to the nice restaurant at the hotel and were seated one table away from a couple we’d seen at the conference. We ordered some wine. We looked over to see this other couple sneering at us. When the waiter asked them what they’d like to drink they made sure we heard them telling him they wanted MILK to drink, event though milk wasn’t on the menu, while looking at us and shaking their heads and send the poor waiter on a goose-chase to find the milk that they probably wouldn’t have otherwise ordered anyway.

Sometimes we can be judgmental *and* hypocritical. I remember growing up in a church where “cards” were considered evil, yet when people got together they played games like Rook and Uno. It’s not like anyone was gambling, even if they had been playing “real” card games, but there was a strong judgmental attitude about cards being wrong – so people came up with substitutes that were no different.

St. Paul confronted this issue with the Roman Church where there were two problems: one was an issue surrounding vegetarians in the congregation; some people insisted on eating only vegetables, while others ate whatever they wanted. The other had to do with the observance of holy days. As Paul says, “One person esteems one day better than another, while

another esteems all days alike” (Romans 14:5).

We don’t have the specifics, but what we can glean from the passage is that there were those who ate only vegetables and were judgmental toward those who ate meat, while the people who ate meat were contemptuous of the vegetarians. Both sides were being judgmental. The vegetarians thought they had the moral high ground, so they looked down on those who ate meat. Those who ate meat thought they had superior knowledge. They *knew* that what they ate didn’t make a difference to God so long as it was received with thanksgiving as described in the 1 letter to Timothy. But they were really just being judgmental in a different way.

We still do the same thing in the Church. The people into contemporary music disdain the traditionalists as old-fashioned and out of touch. The traditionalists scorn the contemporary folks for having no sense of reverence. Some of those who see things like alcohol, tobacco, cards, movies, or dancing as issues covered by our Christian liberty really do look down their noses at “those poor and simple-minded” people that practice abstinence.

So it really doesn’t matter so much which side of an issue you’re on. We can very easily become judgmental toward *anyone* whose opinions are different from our own. The sad thing is that we then hide our judgmentalism under the cloak of Christian convictions.

St. Paul told the Romans, “Stop judging one another regardless of which position you take.” And then he added, “Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another. It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand” (Romans 14:4). He told them, “Stop trying to play God towards your brothers and sisters in Christ. God is their judge, not you!”

That’s really the sin inherent in judgmentalism: taking God’s role as judge on ourselves. Jesus said, “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” There are a lot of times when the log in our own eye is the sin of being

judgmental – the sin of taking God’s role on ourselves.

We saw Jesus use hyperbole last week when he talked about the ten thousand talent debt of the kings servant – an impossible debt to rack up and even more impossible to pay off. Well, it’s impossible to have a log in your eye, but just as the gazillion dollar debt of that servant represents the weight of our sin against God, the long in one’s own eye can very well represent God’s *verdict* on our sin of judgmentalism. If this really is the case, then the seriousness of our sin in being judgmental isn’t so much that we judge a brother or sister, *but that in doing so we assume the role of God.*

Now this doesn’t mean that we should never pass judgment on the practices or beliefs of others. When someone’s conduct or beliefs are in *clear contradiction* to what Holy Scripture teaches, then we are right – we even have an obligation – to point out their sin. There are a lot of practices that the Bible clearly says are sin. They’re throughout Scripture, but some of the best examples are the lists in Romans 1, Galatians 5, and 2 Timothy 3. They make it clear that things like idolatry, sexual immorality, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, rage, rivalry, dissension, envy, drunkenness, slander, lack of self-control, and the like are all clearly sinful. When we declare them to be the sins that they are, we are not judging so much as agreeing with God’s Word. God is judging through Scripture, not we ourselves.

That said, we still have to be careful. We can rightly judge in accordance with Scripture, but still sin if our attitude is one of self-righteousness. We sin when we condemn the obvious and gross sin of others while failing to acknowledge that we too are sinners.

We’ve been talking so far about things we *do*, but we can also fall into judgmentalism in addressing *beliefs*; let’s call it *doctrinal judgmentalism*. This is probably becoming less and less of an issue these days, but not for good reason. Increasingly evangelicals are coming to see doctrine as unimportant. One year we celebrated Reformation Sunday at our church in Portland and one individual was very upset about it. “Why are we celebrating a bunch of men and their

movement that created a huge division in the Church?” she asked me, and then said, “Jesus is all that matters, why dispute other things?”

Well, the fact is that doctrine is important and we have to take it seriously. But because we are (or should be) devoted to God’s truth, we can easily fall into the sin of judgmentalism. The doctrine of the Trinity as defined by the councils of the Church, the person of Christ as being both fully God and fully man, his substitutionary atonement for our sins and the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone, and the inspiration and inerrancy of Holy Scripture. These are all critical doctrines and in each case they are places where we have to draw a line in the sand. There is *no compromise* on these issues. These are doctrines on which the church stands or falls. If we see them compromised or downplayed we have an obligation to take a stand, whether it’s the liberals on one side or the “word of faith” teachers and “oneness” Pentecostals on the other. In every case they are compromising the very Gospel itself.

But in doing so we have to be careful not to fall into the sin of judgmentalism. We may disagree so strongly that we demonise them. Because we believe so strongly in the importance of sound doctrine, we can very easily become hypercritical of those with whom we disagree. We have an obligation to express our disagreements, but we need to do so in a way that doesn’t degenerate into other sinful ways of expressing ourselves.

Finally, I want to end by talking about what happens when we make a habit of being judgmental – we develop a critical spirit as a way of life – looking for and finding fault with anything and everything. It doesn’t matter what the topic of conversation is – a person, a church, a thing, whatever – you find something negative to say about it. We all know people like this. Veronica pointed out to me at one point that our daughter was starting to be like this, not because she developed the habit on her own, but because she was imitating me. I was in the habit of making note of lots of little things that I saw around me: hey, that kid not wearing a bike helmet; hey, that guy didn’t use his turn signal; argh, Superstore never has anything in the same place twice – stuff like that. I mean it wasn’t extreme,

but I realised that I often focus on stuff that may be legitimate problems, but they usually aren't worth noting, aren't my business, and harping on them doesn't show much grace.

I think, that like so many other of our "acceptable" sins, critical spirits show themselves up in our families. A husband or a wife is constantly looking for their spouse's faults and shortcomings or they constantly point out their children's flaws and mistakes and rarely praise them for doing well. Bridges points out the example of a friend who was raised in a Christian home with a father who was hypercritical of his middle-daughter. As she got older she developed into a person who never seemed to be able to do anything right – at least you'd think that to hear her dad berate her. The more he criticised her posture, the more she slumped. The more he pointed out her lack of eye contact, the more her eyes became fixed on the floor. If his repeatedly putting her down "for her own good" (as he saw it) has one result, it was a type of self-fulfilling prophecy. She felt her dad's pattern of criticism as rejection, and she came to see herself as a reject. As an adult her one priority in life was to seek out people who would accept her, but as those people got to know her they saw her as someone whom they could take advantage of. On his deathbed, her father realised his sinfulness and tearfully repented of his critical spirit towards his daughter. But by then it was too late. By then she had secretly become promiscuous and a crack addict.

This is an extreme example of the destructive nature of being critical and judgmental, but it's something that happens – and all too often. There's plenty of evidence around us of the sinfulness of this sin. They say it takes seven compliments to undo the effects of one criticism. So we need to look at ourselves, or better yet, we ought to subject ourselves to the examination of others. Do we have a critical spirit? Are we judgmental? Do we constantly find fault with others?

Instead of being critical and judgmental, we need to be like St. Paul. When it came to the divisive issues in the Roman Church – and this may come as a shock to some of us – he didn't try to change anyone's convictions in regard to what they ate or

which days they considered special. Instead he said, "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5). I have to admit that I struggle with that statement. I think that may be true of most of us. As Christians we don't like ambiguity. It's hard to accept that someone else may have a different opinion than ours and that we can both be acceptable to God. It doesn't mean that there's not right or wrong, and for that reason we need to study God's Word all the more so that we can come to the point of being "convinced," as Paul says, of what is right and what is wrong. Our convictions need to be based on the absolute truth of Scripture. But again, Paul says it – right from the mouth of the Apostle: "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind." He didn't try to fix one party or the other – to straighten them out. And so we need to take St. Paul seriously: hold to our convictions, but do so in humility. If we do that, we'll be much less likely to fall into the sin of judgmentalism.

Please pray with me: Our Father, we confess that in our pride and in our mistaken desire to compare ourselves to others, we often become judgmental. We confess that we take your role of Judge Supreme for ourselves when we should know better. Forgive us for our judgmentalism and for being overly critical. Remind us of the great grace that you have shown us, so that we can show it to others. We ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

*(This series of sermons is adapted from Jerry Bridges book, "Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate", NavPress, 2007.)*