

Judging: “Does a Christian have the right to judge others?”

One who does not wish his heresies condemned or his sins exposed usually counters his would-be opposition with Christ’s words, “Judge not, that you be not judged.” (Matthew 7:1). These words, however, cannot legitimately be construed to be a sacred defense behind which all manner of evil can operate without fear of rebuke.

Christ does not prohibit forming opinions about others, and in this same chapter instructs His disciples to discern between false and true teachers saying, “by their fruits you will know them” (Matthew 7:15-20). The products of one’s life are a criterion for discerning whether he is a false teacher to be shunned or a Biblical teacher to be followed.

Furthermore, Jesus Christ taught in Jerusalem’s temple, “Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment” (John 7:24). He not only told the assembly to make distinctions, but He also gave them the basis for the distinctions—righteousness.

The Christian who does not make Biblical distinctions between righteousness and evil leaves himself vulnerable to Satan’s intrigue. For this reason, the apostle Paul wrote, “Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:21, 22). The person who refuses to test his life in this manner, preferring instead a laissez faire ethic, robs himself of the abundant life Christ promises.

The Savior continually exposed error during His earthly ministry, sometimes in the sharpest language. He condemned the Pharisees on one occasion as being hypocrites and whitewashed tombs (Matthew 23:27). And on another occasion called them “blind leaders of the blind” (Matthew 15:14).

The apostles followed suit, Stephen addressing the Sanhedrin as, “you stiff-necked” (Acts 7:51). Paul told Timothy in a challenge which should be the legacy of every Bible preacher, “convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (2Timothy 4:2). All this assumes the capability and responsibility of discerning between truth and error.

Christ’s command, therefore, to “judge not” cannot be interpreted as a prohibition against forming or expressing convictions. What then, does it mean?

Following Christ’s command, the Bible says, “For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; And with the same measure you use, it will be measured back to you” (Matthew 7:2). Jesus taught that we should be careful in establishing distinctions, for the standards one uses to judge others will be the standards used to judge him. If he sees a splinter in his brother’s eye, that splinter should remind him of the beam that is in his own eye (Matthew 7:3-5). If he sees his brother overtaken by sin, the truly spiritual Christian will help his brother, but will do so in a way which is mindful of his own frailties (Galatians 6:1-5).

The one who distinguishes between good and evil must therefore have the right attitude, or he himself becomes sinful, no matter how correct his discernment is. Indiscriminate condemnation is absurd, James points out, because man really has no power to back up his condemnation by

either salvation or destruction. Men therefore should not presume to make distinctions apart from the Word of God, for the One Who revealed that Word does have the power in enforce its precepts (James 4:11-12).

The Christian is not bound to give up his God-given rational faculties and Bible-based convictions for mindless, spineless compliance with every whim of society. In forming his convictions, however, he must not set himself up as judge apart from God's Word, issuing anathemas presumptuously and failing to discern his own faults.

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