

# Passing Judgment

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Romans 14:13-18

Sermon Series: The Kingdom of God

*“Never before in history has the absence of judgment become glorified as a virtue.”*

- Thomas Sowell

A Jewish rabbi and a Catholic priest were seated next to each other at a banquet. When the meal was served, there was a slice of ham on the rabbi’s plate. You might know that kosher laws forbid Jews from eating pork. The rabbi did not offer protest; he simply proceeded to eat the rest of the food on his plate. The Catholic priest, noticing these developments, commented to the rabbi, “Rabbi, you know that the dietary laws of the Old Testament were instituted during a time when pork was dangerous to digest, due to the lack of refrigeration. Trichinosis was rampant in those days, so your ancestors showed good judgment in prohibiting eating pork to save the lives of many Israelites. But those days are long gone, pork is now safe and there is no reason to cling to outmoded religious practices. Rabbi, when will you eat your first bite of ham?” The rabbi smiled and said, “At your wedding, Father, at your wedding.”

The priestly vow of celibacy and the rabbinic practice of eating kosher foods pertain to today’s sermon topic. We are focusing on what the Bible has to say about passing judgment on one another. Before I elaborate on this point, let me say a good word about making judgments. People are afraid today of making moral judgments.

Making judgments is considered antiquarian. The fear of being judgmental has reached epidemic proportions in our culture. Of course, this moral judgment against making moral judgments is itself a moral judgment!

Columnist Thomas Sowell said, “Never before in history has the absence of judgment become glorified as a virtue.”

A graduate professor lamented in an article I read recently about the inability of graduate students to engage in meaningful debate these days. “We can’t enter into a good argument anymore,” he lamented. “As soon as someone takes a stand on anything, someone else claims the person is being judgmental. That’s it. End of discussion. Everyone is intimidated.”

People justify their non-judgmental position by quoting Jesus’ admonition, “Don’t judge.” Even people who know little else about the Bible have this verse imprinted in their memory. The way this verse is used or misused says more about the spirit of our day than the spirit in which Jesus spoke this command.

I invite you to turn to this passage in Matthew 7 where Jesus says, as part of his Sermon on the Mount, “Judge not, so that you may not be judged” (7:1). What Jesus challenges in his sermon is a judgmental attitude. The picture

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Jesus paints to drive his point home is almost comical. How can someone with an enormous log in his own eye remove the speck of sawdust from his neighbor's eye? (7:3-5).

There are two basic meanings for judge in the Greek. Judge can mean to discern and evaluate or to condemn. You can guess which meaning Jesus utilizes here? Displaying a condemning, condescending attitude! It's God's prerogative alone to condemn and to forgive. God is the only one qualified to make such determinations.

Jesus recognizes the appropriateness of distinguishing right from wrong and good from evil. He goes to say in verse 5, "Do not give to dogs what is holy." Surely it takes discernment to determine what is holy. Jesus warns his disciples in verse 15, "Beware of false prophets." How can we delineate false prophets unless we judge what they are prophesying?

Jesus doesn't trash the faculty of judgment. He doesn't criticize critical thinking. Jesus said elsewhere, "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment" (John 7:24).

We make judgments continuously. Is this a good restaurant? Does my car need gas? Is it safe to cross the street? Of necessity, we make judgments all the time. We want to make good, informed decisions.

We have entrusted our elected representatives with the authority to make good judgments about safe highway speed. Suppose

someone is speeding in your neighborhood. The police detect the speeder on radar and pull him over.

"Sir, I clocked you going 60 mph in a 35 zone.

"Oh," he claims innocently, "the Bible says, 'don't judge.'"

Try telling that to the judge! It's our civic duty to exercise good judgment. A society that refuses to make moral judgments descends into chaos.

There is a fine line between making good moral judgments and becoming judgmental. We seek to make good moral judgments about right and wrong. We teach children not to lie, cheat or steal. But we must resist the tendency to become self-righteous and condemning in our judgments. Good judgment is needed; becoming judgmental is not!

For several months we've been preaching on the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is not simply a place you go after you die. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:15).

Christians are citizens of God's kingdom. As kingdom people, we endeavor to live according to kingdom principles. As you will notice on our bulletin cover, we are focusing this Lent on what it means to live as kingdom people. It means to refrain from passing judgment on each other over disputable matters, to speak the truth in love, to practice mutual forgiveness and forbearance, to confront one another when wrongs have been committed and to lay down our lives for one another.

Last Sunday, I ended my sermon with a "Lenten Resolve," as I called

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it. I concluded this resolve with the words, “I pledge myself to this body of believers. I will resist idle gossip, stupid controversies and hurtful slander. I will thwart backstabbing and back-biting. I promise to build up and encourage. I will speak the truth in love and hold fast to what is good....”

Some people wanted to know afterward whether I was mad about something. No. Was I hurt by something somebody said? No. Was I angry with our staff? No. This resolve was the aggregate effect of 29 years worth of observing personal interactions in the church. The Christian Church often acts too much like the world Christ came to save. God calls us to act like kingdom people, not children of the devil.

The rap on Christians from people outside the church is that Christians are judgmental. We are quick to find fault in other people. Religious people are particularly susceptible to becoming judgmental. It goes with the territory, you might say. While those who don't care can exercise flabby indifference to moral issues, we can't. So there's a tendency to step over the line from simply making judgments about something to becoming judgmental. We care so much about doing the right thing that we can become pushy about it.

I can be at a social function somewhere, standing around a punch bowl with people I don't know. We're making social chit-chat when the topic turns to “So

what do you do?” When I tell people I'm a Christian minister, some of them look as though they just swallowed a canary. I watch them taking a mental inventory to see if they have just said anything off-color. Without saying a word, people think I'm judging them. As I said, it goes with the territory.

We need to exercise caution in passing judgment on someone, since we don't know all the facts about that person. When we don't know all the facts, we make assumptions about people. Our biases and stereotypes cloud our judgments. The Jewish sage, Rabbi Hillel, wrote, “Don't judge someone until you yourselves have come into his circumstances.” In the words of a Native American maxim, “Don't judge another until you have walked a mile in his moccasins.”

Paul addresses this matter of passing judgment on each other in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans. The first verse of the chapter frames the issue. The early church is “quarreling about opinions” or, as the New International Version translates this verse, “passing judgment on disputable matters.”

The early church was composed of Gentile Christians, who could eat anything they wanted since Jesus had loosened food laws. But Jewish Christians adhered to Old Testament food laws and ate only kosher foods.

The early church had quite a dispute over this issue. Paul responded, if you are so intent on judging each other, then judge this: not to become a stumbling block to

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each other or trip each other up (14:13). Paul not only urges them to refrain from passing judgments; he urges them to show consideration toward each another.

Christians must be able to discriminate between matters of primary importance from matters of secondary importance. The divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ is of primary importance. God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is of primary importance. Salvation by grace through faith is of primary importance. But how people demonstrate allegiance to Christ, whether in baptism by immersion, pouring or sprinkling is of secondary importance. Whether we sing traditional hymns or contemporary worship songs is of secondary importance. How a church is governed is of secondary importance. Our goal is to keep the main thing the main thing!

St. Augustine said, “In essential things, unity; in non-essential things, liberty; in all things, charity.” Unity in essential things, liberty in non-essential things, charity in all things!

Verse 17 summarizes Paul’s argument. “The kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Food and drink are of secondary importance in the kingdom of God; righteousness, joy and peace are of primary importance!

Paul doesn’t really care all that much about food and drink. What he cares about are personal relationships in the church. Relationships count in the kingdom of

God. Like St. Augustine said, “In essential things, unity; in non-essential things, liberty; in all things, charity.”

