

The Bible tells us that we should not judge. Jesus says: "Judge not, and you will not be judged." But the Bible also tells us that we should judge. Paul, for example, in 1 Corinthians 5 says: "For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?" So which is it? Are we supposed to judge, or are we supposed to not judge? What does this mean? What are we supposed to do?

And I think a lot of the confusion here, Christians, comes from the world, because in our world today judging is always seen as something bad. It is not good for us to judge others in the eyes of the world. In fact, I'm sure it even makes us feel a little bit uncomfortable to hear the word "judge." It probably gets even worse when we hear the word "judgmental." If someone were to say that I was being judgmental, I would probably very quickly try to show how I'm not being judgmental. "I am loving. I am caring. I take care of others. I give all the help that I can. I try to be accepting, whatever it may be. So how can you say that I am being judgmental?" It becomes almost a kind of reflex because of the way that the world thinks about judging. And even what Jesus says in our Gospel reading gets used in this way too. People will sometimes say, "Well, aren't you going against what the Bible says? Aren't you going against what Jesus says when he says, 'Judge not and you will not be judged'?" How can you then say that what I am doing is wrong? It seems pretty judgmental."

And so even if we don't intend it, the world deeply colors how we understand the Bible. We hear what Jesus says, and we think that it means just the same thing as the world. "Judge not and you will not be judged." But then we hear what Paul says, and it almost feels wrong to us. We know that Paul says that we should judge those within, but judging is bad, isn't it? So what am I supposed to do with that? I'm really not sure what to make of what Paul says when he says that we should judge. And this confusion, as I said, comes from the world.

So if we want to clear up this confusion then, Christians, what we need to do is we need to listen to what the Bible says. Not what we think it says, but what it actually says. That's the only way that we're going to clear this up. If we want to understand when we should judge and when we should not judge, we need to understand what the Bible means when it talks about judging and not what the world means when it does.

So the word that we translate as "judge," then, in its most basic sense means to divide or to separate. So it's like taking a group of something and putting it into different categories, sorting it according to different criteria like size or shape or whatever it may be. That's a kind of judgment. If I had a bushel of apples, for example, and I took all of those apples and I sorted them into different groups, like red versus green, large versus small, whatever it may be, that would be judging in the biblical sense. And we do this most commonly in terms of good and bad. If I were to take those apples again and sort all the good ones into a pile to keep and put all the bad ones in a pile to throw away, that would also be exercising judgment. So judgment in the biblical sense, then, is to choose the good and to reject the bad. And that's true not only of physical objects like apples or whatever it may be, but it's also true of our actions. We have to ask ourselves: is what I am doing good or bad? Is what I'm doing moral or immoral? Would God be happy if I did this? Would God be angry if I did that? That is what it means to judge. This is also true for other people. I need to ask: is what this other person is doing something that deserves to be praised or something that deserves to be punished? In that way, we are called to judge. This kind of judgment is good and right and true.

And so this judgment then is right whenever we apply it to showing right and wrong. God gives the general law. He gives the general principle, things like, "You shall not steal." Things like, "You shall not commit adultery." And we have to apply it to our own situation, whatever that situation may be. And this is what Paul means, then, when he says that we are also called to judge the sins of others. And we have to understand what he means by that. In 1 Corinthians 5, he says: "I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one." Associating with or eating with someone in that case means that we treat it as if it is nothing. To treat that sin as if it was something that is no big deal, that it's okay if they do these things. We as Christians cannot do that. We as Christians can't treat sin as nothing. We must speak out about it. We have to go to our brother, and we have to say, "Brother, what you're doing is wrong! It is a sin. You need to turn away from it. You need to repent, and turn back towards God." We, of course, cannot be hypocritical about it: to do the same thing while we condemn it in others. We also cannot be proud and boastful about it, as if we are somehow better than them by pointing these things out. But we are called to do it in love, to seek the good of the other person, to show them that what they're doing is wrong so that they may turn from it and live. That kind of judgment is good. That is the kind of judgment we as Christians are called to exercise in all things: to hold on to the good and to reject the evil.

So then, Christians, when is judgment wrong? What does Jesus mean when he says: "Judge not, and you shall not be judged." Judgment is wrong when it leads us into sin, when it leads us into something evil. It is like sorting into the wrong category, taking something and treating it as bad or treating it as something to be avoided for the wrong reason, even if the reason in my mind seems logical or good or right. Someone, for example, might say: "Why should I do good to those who hate me? It doesn't seem like it's going to do any good. Why should I bless those who curse me? It's just going to be wasted on them. Why should I pray for those who abuse me? Shouldn't they be punished instead? Shouldn't they be condemned for what they are doing? I would much rather love those who love me. I would much rather do good for those who do good for me. I would much rather lend to those who could lend me something in return. That's what seems good and right to do. And all of those other people, well, they wouldn't appreciate it anyway if I did something good for them. So I don't want to do it. This seems like the right thing to do."

But Christians, how is that any different from the world? Unbelievers do the same thing. And to judge in this way, or rather to misjudge, often builds on itself. We end up getting the same thing in return. Those who are quick to condemn find themselves condemned. Those who do not want to forgive will not be forgiven. Those who do not give will not be given to. As Jesus says, "With the measure that you use, it will be measured back to you." To judge in this way is not right, because it leads us into sin.

And Christians, God has not acted in this way towards us! What if God waited until someone was truly appreciative, someone truly deserved what he was doing for them? What if he waited to do it until then? Would he ever get around to doing it? And I'm not just talking about the blessings of grace and life and forgiveness and salvation, but even the common blessings of the earth: the harvest, the rain, even the sun coming up this morning. If he waited until we deserved it, would he do any of those things? Jesus says in Matthew chapter 5: "He makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." If God waited until

then, Christians, we wouldn't have received any of the rain that we have gotten over the past few weeks. We wouldn't even have a hundredth if it all depended on our deserving it or our being appreciative of it. We would still be bone-dry, waiting for these things to happen, waiting for something that would never come. And the sun coming up this morning too, if God waited until we were truly deserving of it, it never would have come. We wouldn't have today if God waited until then.

But God shows his mercy to us, Christians, by giving us these things anyway, even when we didn't deserve them! And above all, he has done this by giving us Jesus Christ, his Son. The Father gave us Jesus to die for us while we were still sinners, while we were still his enemies. Jesus died to save us from our sins even when we didn't deserve any of it. What amazing grace that God has given! A grace that led him to show us mercy even when we didn't deserve it. It is a grace without limit, a grace upon grace, overflowing, super-abounding! A grace and a mercy which never comes to an end. He has done this for us in Jesus Christ, his Son.

So let us be like our heavenly Father, Christians. Let us exercise right judgment to turn away from evil and to turn towards what is good. And let us also do good for those who don't seem to deserve it. Let us be merciful as our Father in heaven is merciful, so that in this way we will be sons of the Most High through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, we give you thanks for the mercy that you have shown to us in Jesus Christ. Lead us to show that same mercy to others, so that we may be ever more like you in all things. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.