

Non-Judgmental?

"Do not judge so that you will not be judged". The modern western world has hijacked this idea from Jesus and it is now 'politically correct' to be 'non-judgmental'! But is our understanding the same as his? What did Jesus mean in **Matthew 7:1-5**?

The differences soon begin to show as soon as anyone says that some action is wrong. Perhaps someone is bold enough to say that homosexual practice is sinful, or that you should not fiddle your business accounts. We are soon told not to be 'judgmental'.

Jesus did not approach wrongdoing in the same way. Many times he said, *"Go and sin no more"*. He did not say, "Oh, you poor person, you couldn't help what you did, it must have been because of the way you were brought up", or some such excusing comment. In the teaching of Jesus and the whole Bible, it is clear that wrongdoing is each individual's responsibility. We cannot find extenuating circumstances. We are responsible for our own actions, and accountable before God.

It has been popular for many years to look for the causes of wrongdoing in the social background of the criminal, and it would be hard to say that childhood and upbringing have no effect at all on the actions of adults, whether criminal or 'ordinary'. In the last few weeks, scientists have apparently confirmed that musical ability is inherited and the debate has moved a step further. There is already a suggestion that some individuals are genetically 'geared' towards crime and that this should be taken into account in criminal cases.

Is it 'judgmental' for Christians to talk about right and wrong in a 'black and white' way? From the 'politically correct' viewpoint, the answer is probably 'Yes'. But what about Jesus' approach? Is that what he meant by, *"Do not judge so that you will not be judged"*?

His illustration is excellent! A man looks at his brother and sees that he has a speck of dirt in his eye. As a carpenter on Galilean building sites, Jesus would have known about this from experience. It is very hard to work properly with sawdust in your eye, so what do you do about it? Do you write off your brother by saying, "he's no good, he's got sawdust in his eye", or do you try to help him?

If you do write off your brother because there is sawdust in his eye - something wrong in his life, says Jesus, why have you not noticed the log of wood in your own eye - an even bigger fault in your own life? If he should be written off, so should you, even more so!

So what is Jesus saying? Does he want me to ignore the 'sawdust' in my brother's eye, to pretend it is not there? Quite the opposite - that would be no help to anyone! If I can write him off for a speck of sawdust, he can write me off a hundred times over for a log, but that is exactly the point. It is not about 'writing off' and 'judging', but about clear vision and dealing with problems. The building work will not get very far with fault-finding and condemnation, but when the builders help each other overcome each other's faults, real progress can be made.

If I have a 'log in my eye', I need to get it out. Why? So that I can boast that "there's nothing wrong in my life" ? No, says Jesus, so that I can see clearly to help my brother with the small 'speck of sawdust' in his life . . . which brings us on to the next point . . .

How do we react if a fellow-believer tries to help us with some fault in our lives? Do we think that attack is the best means of defence and start looking for 'logs' in their life? Do we protest that they have no right to meddle and that they should stop being 'judgmental' ? Would we prefer it if they stopped? Why?

Of course this 'eye-check' needs to be done in the right way, but it does need to be done. Jesus leaves us with no escape route! In **Matthew 18:15-17**, he says what I should do if my fellow-believer sins against me. I need to go to him in private to show him his sin, but with the purpose of winning him back. If I am going to him in order to prove that he is wrong and I am right, (and maybe I just can't wait for him to reject this approach so that I can 'go public'), then I need to take a good look in the mirror for the 'log' - it's certainly there!

But if I am the one who has done something wrong so that my fellow-believer has something against me, what should I do? Should I just sit there and wait for him to pluck up the courage to confront me according to **Matthew 18**? It's quite easy to 'tough it out', especially if you have a strong personality and think that other people are a little afraid of you for any reason. Probably no-one will risk the upset of such a difficult conversation, so can I just forget about it? No, says Jesus in **Matthew 5:23-24**. If my fellow-believer has something against me, it is more important for me to be reconciled with him than it is for me to offer worship to God! Yes, that is what Jesus said!

Does that mean that I need to tackle every believer I know every time I see something not quite right in their life? I think we know that this is unrealistic and not at all what Jesus had in mind. After all, he taught us to seek forgiveness from our Father in the same way as we forgive other people and release them from 'debts' (**Matthew 6:12**). Perhaps a clue is

in **Matthew 18**, where it talks about the need to 'win' your brother. That surely means that you must have already 'lost' him, so you are going to him to win him back. In practice in most situations, we can forgive a fellow-believer's wrong action without needing to go to them and sort it out, but sometimes the relationship has been affected in such a way that it cannot just be 'left'. Then we need to make contact and seek to restore the relationship, whether it is our sin or theirs which seems to be the cause.

So, a brother or sister in Christ is coming to me with the right motives, not trying to put me down, not trying to humiliate me, but simply because they have seen something in my life which they really think I need to deal with, something which has probably affected our relationship. How do I react?

If in self-defence I start looking for faults in their life, I have missed the point. They are coming in love, not in hatred or to attack me. They are not trying to score points off my failures, but to help me grow in Christ. If they are coming with any judgement at all, it is not condemnation of me but of the things I have done. Don't I know that I am a sinner saved by grace? Don't I thank the Lord when he shows me by his Spirit when I have gone off course? Can I not thank my brother or sister who does the same thing, who is turning me back from sin, saving my soul from death and covering a multitude of sins? (**James 5:20**)

Our response to this may be a useful indicator of our practical experience of God's grace to us in the Lord Jesus Christ. We may say that we are only justified before God by the finished work of Christ, but in practice we would often like our standing before men (including fellow-believers) to be based on our own performance!

Paul knew that his standing did not depend on his innocence before men, but on the Lord's judgement of his life. (See **1 Corinthians 4:1-5**) He did not even get into judging himself - unlike us, all too often! Especially with our fellow-believers, we should be able to leave all that behind. We know that we are accepted in our Father's presence because of his grace to us in the Lord Jesus. Do we need any other defence?

If I have sinned and my brother or sister comes to encourage me to repentance and forgiveness, what have I to fear? God's grace is still the same. And if they have made a mistake, and I am 'not guilty' this time, there is no fear in coming into the open, to let the light of truth shine into my life (**John 3:17-21**). In that case, I may need to say that I cannot immediately agree that I have done wrong, but that I will continue to seek the Lord about what they have said and come back to them. They may agree to do the same. In any case, our relationship can begin to be

restored. And, by the way, even if they are coming to me to try to score points, but they show me something that is wrong in my life, is there any reason for me not to repent? It may even change the whole relationship with them if I do!

Jesus was certainly not 'non-judgmental', at least by modern 'politically correct' standards. He spoke out clearly and repeatedly against wrongdoing at all levels of society. Even their refusal to believe his message was enough for him to warn three towns in Galilee of the consequences! (**Matthew 11:20-24**)

Paul said that a vital part of his work was "*admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ*" (**Colossians 1:28**). That word 'admonish' means 'cause to face up', or perhaps 'lovingly confront'. He went on to encourage the believers in Colossae to do the same amongst themselves, in the context of real effective unity and forgiveness, and giving thanks to God at the same time. (**Colossians 3:16**, in the context of **3:12-17**) He says the same to the church at Ephesus, in **Ephesians 4:14-15**.

The book of **Hebrews** does the same, in **4:12-14** and **10:19-25**.

We have a responsibility, not only to live rightly before our Father as individuals, but to help our brothers and sisters to do the same and to respond when they try to help us. We have been brought into the family of God, where the freedom of love replaces the slavery of fear and hatred. (**1 John 4:15-21 & Hebrews 2:14-15**)

If we try to confront ('admonish') on any other basis than this, we shall fail and probably cause more problems than we solve. Equally, if we refuse the loving confrontation of our fellow-believers, we risk the hardening of our own hearts and a diminishing relationship with our Father.

Jesus himself was "*full of grace and truth*" (**John 1:14**).

If we are keen on judgement and right and wrong, we might major on being full of truth. If we see the importance of good relationships and understanding, we might emphasise being full of grace. In the world's eyes, these are conflicting opposites. Jesus was **full** of both, not half-full of each. His love was not afraid of truth, nor did his truth compromise his love.

He calls his followers to learn to live in the same way.

Dave Taylor March 2001

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