

## To Judge Or Not To Judge **Is It Ever Right To Judge Others?**

Many Christians are confused and not Biblically informed on this subject. Some might even ask, "Why is this topic of any importance to us?" The Bible says it is our Christian duty to judge those who are within the church (1 Corinthians 5:12). In the age to come, the Bible says that the overcoming church will reign with Christ and judge the world and angels (Revelation 20:6; 22:5; 1 Corinthians 6:2-3). How can we expect to join Jesus Christ in His future reign and righteous judgment over the nations if we shirk our Christian duty to exercise godly judgment during our stay on earth?

Some Christians think it is wrong to ever judge another person's conduct. However, this is not Biblically correct. Spiritual discernment and godly judgment is a God-given gift that should steadily increase as we progressively walk in God's sanctification (Hebrews 5:14). An unscriptural fear and aversion to "judging" has caused many Christians to mistakenly think they can never lovingly confront a fellow Christian who is practicing sin. It has also led many Christians to think they can never discern whether someone (who claims to be a Christian) is really following Jesus Christ or not. Since this kind of godly judgment and discernment is often lacking among many professing Christians today, untold numbers of unbelievers have freely joined the church. As a consequence, many churches have now been leavened by the hypocrisy of unbelievers who are not born again, and also by the hypocrisy of professing Christians who are unrepentantly practicing sin. The primary reason for this pervasive and deeply troubling situation is a dearth of sound Bible teaching and a lack of godly sanctification in many churches due primarily to a refusal to zealously love and adhere to the absolute truth of God's Word.

Before we continue, it is important to point out that there is only one way we can walk in sanctification - *by faith in the truth* (Acts 26:18; 2 Thessalonians 2:13). We simply cannot overcome sin and walk in sanctification unless we believe and act on the truth of God's Word (who Jesus is and what He accomplished for us on the cross). More specifically, we must act on the Biblical truth that when we were born again God removed our sinful nature, so that His Son's Spirit could dwell in us (Romans 6:1-11; Galatians 2:20; 4:6; Colossians 2:11). When we apply this truth of the cross to our lives each day by faith, we are able to "put off" our old sinful way of thinking and acting and "put on" Christ's way of thinking and acting (Romans 8:13; Ephesians 4:22-24). This is the only way by God's grace we can overcome sin and walk in sanctification. And without this daily sanctification (*that comes by believing and acting on the truth of the cross,*) it is impossible to have God's wisdom to properly discern and judge what is right and wrong. We should also note that God's love is the fruit of walking in sanctification (Galatians 5:22), and having God's love is essential to be able to properly judge others who are caught in sin (Galatians 6:1; Ephesians 4:15).

Let us now look at the Biblical meaning of “judging” to help us clarify the difference between right and wrong judging. In the New Testament, the Greek word *krino* simply means *to judge*. However, the word *krino* also denotes a wide range of actions that are involved in the act of properly judging. These actions may include discerning and assessing a person’s behavior; confronting and disciplining a person based on their behavior; and *judicially* sentencing and punishing a person based on their behavior. But the word *krino* can also denote a variety of actions associated with improperly judging, such as showing favoritism, prejudice, or contempt; and disdain, slandering, or wrongly condemning others. Therefore, the context of each individual Scripture passage will help us determine whether *krino* means to either rightly or wrongly judge.

First, *krino* can mean to judge *wrongly or unrighteously*. This is the meaning of Jesus’ admonishment, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged (Matthew 7:1).” In other words, if you judge others unrighteously, you will then be judged by God for your unrighteous judging. What does it mean to judge unrighteously? The Bible says that we should not wrongly judge others by their outward appearance or judge others unrighteously with an attitude of contempt or disdain. Jesus said, “Do not judge according to *appearance* but judge with righteous judgment (John 7:24; see also John 8:15).” And the apostle Paul wrote, “Why do you judge your brother? Why do you regard your brother with *contempt*? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God (Romans 14:10; see also Luke 18:9).” The apostle James gave an example of this kind of unrighteous judging when he chastised Christians who were *biased* and favored the rich while disdain the poor (James 2:1-3). James rebuked them: “Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (James 2:4).” The Bible admonishes that it is wrong to treat other people *either better or worse* based on their race, gender, ethnicity, social status, economic class, or political position (1 Timothy 5:21; James 2:8-9). This is the kind of evil judging and discrimination (*whether in thought or deed*) that Christians should definitely not do. If we treat others wrongly with undue partiality, favoritism or prejudice, we will be held accountable by God who shows no partiality and favoritism toward any man (Acts 10:34-35; 1 Peter 1:17).

Second, *krino* can mean to judge *correctly or righteously*. This is the kind of judging Jesus meant when He said to “judge with righteous judgment (John 7:24),” and when He said, “You have judged correctly (Luke 7:43).” For example, this is the kind of proper discernment and godly judgment that a congregation of believers should exercise when they assess the behavior and ministry of others who claim to be Christians. Jesus said, “You will know (*discern*) them by their fruit (Matthew 7:16).” As an example, Paul taught, “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment (1 Corinthians 14:29).” In other words, believers who hear prophecies should assess and judge those prophecies to determine whether they are of God or not. This is why it is imperative for every believer to personally study the Scriptures in order to be

able to discern and judge whether the “Christian” ministers they are listening to have godly character and sound Biblical doctrine. In this regard, the Book of Acts records the story of a group of believers in Berea who were highly commended, not just because they eagerly received the gospel, but because they also examined the Scriptures daily to judge whether the teaching they received was actually the truth (Acts 17:10-11). In another example of this kind of godly judging, Jesus praised the church in Ephesus because they examined some who claimed to be Christian ministers, and correctly judged them to be false ministers (Revelation 2:2). This is also the kind of godly discerning and judging that a fellowship of believers should exercise when they correct and discipline one of their members for sinful misconduct. This is what Paul meant when he said, “Are you not to judge those who are within the church? (1 Corinthians 5:12).” This is the proper judging that Paul himself did when he said, “I have already judged him who committed this sin... I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus (1 Corinthians 5:3-5).”

This is the kind of righteous judging that Christians should practice to preserve discipline and holiness in the church. One reason for judging a professing Christian in this way is so that he might repent from practicing sin and be spared God’s judgment and punishment. This kind of proper judgment also protects the church from being “leavened” or influenced by the chronic sinful behavior of those who claim to be Christians. For example, the apostle Peter righteously judged other professing Christians who sinned (Acts 5:1-11; 8:13-23). Another Biblical example of proper judgment is when the elders of a church wisely judge and settle disputes between fellow Christians (1 Corinthians 6:1-4). The Bible says that mature Christians should have their spiritual senses trained to discern and judge what is good and evil (Hebrews 5:11). Godly discernment is a prerequisite for God’s people if they want to exercise righteous judgment for the good of the church. The fear of God should give every true believer a strong desire to have this kind of godly discernment to order to be able to correctly and spiritually assess the doctrine and character of others who claim to be Christians. For without this sound judgment, the church can easily fall prey to false Christians, charlatan ministers, and counterfeit doctrines.

Third, the last meaning of *krino* is reserved for God’s *final* judgment alone. The Bible says, “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy (James 4:12).” Every person will face God’s divine, eternal judgment of their soul. “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face the judgment... for we will all stand before the judgment seat of God (Hebrews 9:27; Romans 14:10).” On that day, God will judge each person impartially without regard to their race, gender, ethnicity, social status, economic class, or political or religious position (2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Peter 2:17). The Bible says, “For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at our heart (1 Samuel 16:7).” God will judge not only our deeds but also our motives and thoughts. The Bible says, “He has fixed a day in

which He will judge the world... on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus (Acts 17:31; Romans 2:16; see also 2 Timothy 4:1; Revelation 20:12)."

We should never attempt to judge others with this eternal "judicial" judgment that is solely reserved for God alone. Jesus said, "Do not judge... and do not *condemn* (Luke 6:37)." The condemnation of men's souls is God's righteous judgment alone. This divine, judicial sentencing will occur on the Day of Judgment when God will pass judgment and condemn those who are lawless to eternal punishment. The Bible says, "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord... the Lord will judge His people. It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:31)." Since there is no condemnation for those who live by the Spirit in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1), we should "speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law (*of faith in Christ*) that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful (James 2:12-13)." Therefore, since we have received mercy for our sins (1 John 1:7-9), we should have mercy on others who are caught in sin (Matthew 18:21-35; Jude 21-23). Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy... be merciful, just as your Father is merciful (Matthew 5:7; Luke 6:36)." The Bible says, "For judgment will be merciless to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment (*condemnation*) (James 2:13)." Once again, this does not mean that we should never righteously judge; however, it does mean that when we correctly judge others, we should have an attitude of mercy with the hope of redeeming the sinner.

What can we conclude from these three distinctive Scriptural meanings of "judging?" The Bible warns us to not judge others incorrectly or unrighteously with disdain, contempt, condemnation, or evil motives. However, the Bible does exhort us to judge others correctly with an attitude of mercy and impartiality according to the standard of the Scriptures. We should always exercise spiritual discernment (*not ungodly discrimination*) and good judgment (*not carnal condemnation*) to determine if a professing Christian's doctrine and conduct is godly. Some people quote Titus 3:2 ("*slander no one*") to argue that we should never say anything critical concerning others; however, the Greek word for *slander* used in this verse is *blasphemo*, which means to speak *malicious lies* about another person. Consequently, the Bible warns us to "put aside all... slander, along with all malice (Ephesians 4:31)." But this does not mean that we should not speak truthfully to another person, if it is appropriate. The Bible says, "Lay aside falsehood and speak truth with one another (Ephesians 4:25)." Regarding another Christian who is caught in sin, Jesus said, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him (Luke 17:3)." Some people also quote Titus 1:15 ("*to the pure all things are pure*") to say that we should only see good in others, and never confront anyone for bad and sinful behavior. However, this kind of humanistic, new age thinking is misguided and directly contradicts the whole counsel of God, as expressed

through His Word, the Bible. It also directly contradicts the example and instruction of Jesus and the early church. Finally, some people misinterpret the King James Version of 1 Corinthians 13:5 ("*love... thinks no evil*") to say that love would never think any evil or bad of others and, in particular, would never suspect anyone of having evil motives. This wrong thinking is a result of grossly misinterpreting the Scriptures. The New American Standard Bible more accurately translates this verse: "*love... does not take into account a wrong suffered.*" The New International Version also precisely translates this verse: "*love... keeps no record of wrongs.*" In other words, the Bible says that if we walk in God's love, we will not hold an unforgiving grudge against those who have done evil or wrong against us. However, this does not mean that love sees no evil, nor does it mean that love does not confront evil. Once again, the wisdom of the Bible firmly contradicts this foolish way of thinking. As an example, Jesus confronted and called out sinners for their evil motives (Matthew 9:14); Peter confronted and called out sinners for their evil motives (Acts 8:22); Paul confronted and called out sinners for their evil motives (Philippians 1:17); and James confronted and called out sinners for their evil motives (James 2:4).

The Bible also says that we must discern and judge our own motives and behavior in order to not incur God's judgment. Paul wrote, "If we judged (*examined*) ourselves rightly, we would not be judged (*by the Lord*) (1 Corinthians 12:31)." Paul also taught, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not recognize that Jesus Christ is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test? (2 Corinthians 13:5)." In other words, have you set apart Christ as Lord in your heart, to the point that you are practicing sanctification and not practicing sin? For if you are practicing sin, you fail the Biblical test of true faith (Romans 14:23; 1 John 3:6). The Bible says that we cannot righteously judge others who are caught in sin if we are also practicing sin. Practicing sin does not mean that we will never sin again; however, it means that we should not be in the regular habit of committing certain sins. Instead, we should be in the habit of overcoming sin by exercising faith in the truth of the cross of Christ (1 John 3:6-8; 5:4-5). Remember that some sins that Christians regularly practice are evident for all to see, whereas other sins which Christians practice are hidden from others, but not from God. With this in mind, Paul soberly wrote to those who practice sin: "Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?... I warn you, as I did before, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Romans 2:1-3; Galatians 5:21)." Now here is our dilemma: How can we expect the church to be holy and right before God, if we ourselves are still practicing sin and are not right with God? How can we righteously judge and correct others' sinful behavior if we ourselves we are storing up God's judgment by continuing to practice unrepentant sin? And how can we possibly expect to help others get free from entangling sins, if we ourselves are also

ensnared by habitual sins? This is why we must learn how to overcome sin (by faith in the grace and truth of the cross), so that we can help free other believers from their entangling sins.

If we do not know how to overcome sin in our own lives, we are faced with two options, either of which is not godly: 1) We will never judge others' sinful behavior (for fear that we also will be judged by others); or 2) We will judge others' behavior unmercifully and hypocritically (because we too are compromised by sin). Does this mean that we are never to righteously judge others' sinful behavior? Certainly not! Does this mean that we have to be perfect in order to properly discern and help others' get free from their sinful behavior? Of course not! However, it does mean that we should be practicing sanctification as a daily habit of faith in our life instead of continuing to practice sin. Once again, we must remember that there is only one way we can by God's grace overcome sin - by exercising faith in the truth of the cross. We must believe and act daily on the Biblical truth that we no longer have a sinful nature and, as a consequence, we have been freed from the power of sin. Jesus said only when we have taken the log out of our own eye (*when we have examined ourselves correctly and turned away from practicing sin*), can we then help take the speck out of our brother's eye (Luke 6:42).

The Bible says that we can only have true spiritual fellowship with professing Christians who 1) Walk in the light and do not practice sin; and 2) Live by the truth of sound Biblical doctrine (1 John 1:6-7). If we continue to practice sin and abdicate our God-given responsibility to discern and judge the conduct and doctrine of both ourselves as well as others who claim to be Christians, we will inevitably become immersed in a soulish (and false) form of fellowship with lawless "Christians" who do not walk in the light or live by the truth. This kind of unholy union with ungodly "tares" will leaven all those who foolishly embrace it in the name of "Christian unity." This is why it is essential for mature Christians to stop practicing sin in order to have their spiritual senses trained to discern good and evil. Although bad behavior and wrong doctrine can often be easy to discern and judge, the real problem arises when they are diabolically disguised as "good" conduct and doctrine. The fact is that a "good" lie can often be disguised when it is wrapped in a little truth. Also, in this regard, Paul said that Satan's workers often disguise themselves as ministers of "morality" (2 Corinthians 11:15). The Bible says that we must walk in sanctification to righteously discern and judge if others are walking in the light and practicing the truth. This includes discerning and judging those Christians who are practicing carnal immorality (1 Corinthians 5:11). It also includes discerning and judging those Christians who are practicing carnal "morality" (2 Timothy 3:5). What is carnal morality? It is trying to practice an outward form of morality based on your own self-will and natural self-discipline, instead of relying solely on Christ's work on the cross to overcome sin. Since this kind of man-made "morality" is not based on faith in the grace and truth of the cross, it is sinful and produces a soulish, hypocritical, and counterfeit

form of Christianity. As Jesus said, "On the outside you appear to people as righteous, but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matthew 23:28)." How do we approach someone who wants to fellowship with us, but they persist in living carnally (either in lawless carnal immorality or lawless carnal morality)? The Bible says that the Spirit and the flesh oppose each other (Galatians 5:17). Therefore, if we are living by faith in the truth of the cross, the likelihood is that lawless individuals who claim to be Christians will be convicted and feel uncomfortable around us and will (of their own choosing) separate themselves from us. The Book of Acts records that when Christians in the early church were full of faith and walking in the truth, unrepentant sinners and false believers did not want to associate with them, and only true converts joined the church (Acts 5:13-14). As John wrote, "They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us (1 John 2:19)."

However, in spite of this Biblical principal, the devil will sometimes try to plant these lawless "Christians" among us to undermine and sabotage God's work. What should we do if a professing Christian (who is practicing sin) insists on regularly meeting together with us for fellowship? Jesus said that we should truthfully and lovingly confront this individual privately at first (Matthew 18:15). Paul said, "Brethren, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him in *a spirit of gentleness*; each one looking to yourself so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:1-2)." However, if the guilty person rejects our spiritual discernment and loving correction, we are then to report their unrepentant misconduct to the whole church for proper judgment and appropriate discipline (Matthew 18:16-17). In this situation, the church will discipline the unrepentant individual by excluding them from fellowship (see 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 and Titus 2:10 as examples). The Bible says, "Do not be bound together with unbelievers (*or unbelieving Christians*), for what partnership has righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? (2 Corinthians 6:14)." This disciplinary exclusion from fellowship applies to any so-called Christian who practices carnal immorality (which is lawlessness), as well as any so-called Christian who practices carnal morality (which is a religious form of lawlessness). This congregational discipline (when called for) is to be applied to everyone in the church, including the elders, without partiality. In the case of an elder of the church who is caught practicing sin, the Bible says, "Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who continue in sin are to be rebuked publically, so that the others may be fearful of sinning. I solemnly charge you in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and His chosen angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and do nothing out of favoritism (1 Timothy 5:19-21)." In some cases, we may even need to confront those who are unrepentant and lawless with strong words and discipline, or as Paul aptly said, "With the rod instead of a spirit of gentleness (1 Corinthians 4:21)."

As an example of judging others righteously, Jesus spoke truthfully and confrontationally to the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus said, "Woe to you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside, but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matthew 23:27-28)." When the need arose, Paul also truthfully confronted others. For example, Paul did not mince any words when he rebuked one individual: "You son of the devil, you enemy of righteousness (Acts 13:10)." Jude rebuked those false "shepherds who feed only themselves... for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever (Jude 12-13)." James also directly confronted others who practiced sin: "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God (James 4:4). And Stephen did likewise: "You stiff-necked people... you always resist the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:52)." Peter confronted the sin of one Christian who had just recently been saved with this harsh assessment: "You are full of bitterness and captive to sin (Acts 8:22)." And Peter addressed another professing Christian with this piercing judgment, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit? (Acts 5:3)." The reason why Jesus and His disciples openly confronted and judged unrepentant sin in their day was because they were consumed with a godly jealousy to protect the church, which is God's family, from the deadly leaven of hypocrisy (see Luke 12:1; 2 Corinthians 11:2-3). Jesus said, "Zeal for Your house consumes Me (Psalm 69:9; John 2:17)." Ironically, if Jesus or His disciples spoke frankly today to false brethren who practice sin, many misguided Christians would criticize them for not being "loving" and would distort the Scriptures to tell them, "Judge not lest you be judged." But are not these misguided Christians actually saying, "Do not confront anyone who is entangled in sin or you also may be exposed for practicing sin?" And yet a "hands-off" attitude like this is not really loving to other Christians or yourself. The Bible says, "Better is open rebuke than love that is concealed. Faithful are the wounds of a friend but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy (Proverbs 27:5-6)." And James wrote, "My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death (James 5:19-20)." Thank God that a "hands-off" approach to dealing with sin in the church is not the Holy Spirit's attitude toward us (unless we persistently reject the Holy Spirit's conviction and discipline in our lives, at which point God may leave us alone to bear the judgment and consequences of our sin).

Why are so many Christians not able to exercise godly judgment to discern, correct and, if necessary, reject the ungodly conduct and bad doctrine of others? As we noted, an underlying reason is a prevailing lack of sanctification among Christians, which is a direct consequence of not believing and acting on the truth of Christ's Atonement (*when Christ died, our sinful nature died with Him, so that He could sovereignly live in us*). Many Christians do not know the difference between right or wrong doctrine because they do not regularly read their Bible, nor do they receive sound Bible teaching. As a result, they do not know how to properly judge others. Another reason why many Christians



do not want to judge others is because they do not want to lose the approval of others. As Jesus said, "They loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God (John 12:43)." And Paul said, "I am now seeking the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ (Galatians 1:10)." Many professing Christians are secretly practicing sin (the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life). As a consequence, they fear that their sins might be exposed if they expose others' sins. Any Christian who willfully and unrepentantly practices sin does not fear God and will, therefore, lack God's divine wisdom, which is required to properly judge between good and evil. The Bible says, "The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom (Proverbs 15:33)." Anyone who continues to practice sin will become increasingly more tolerant of sin in themselves and others. They will develop an aversion to judging others who practice sin for fear that their own sinful behavior might be exposed, and will often misquote and misuse "judge not lest you be judged" as a religious cloak and excuse to practice sin. In contrast, any believer who is led (governed) by the Holy Spirit will discern and properly judge what is good and evil. Thus the Bible says, "The spiritual man is able to judge all things (1 Corinthians 2:15)."

God has given us wisdom and discernment to protect us. Therefore, it is imperative that we practice sanctification and exercise godly judgment not only for our sake, but to protect Christ's body, His church. Peter said, "The end of all things is near, therefore, be of sound judgment (1 Peter 4:7)." If Christians only believed and acted on the truth of God's Word that they have been decisively freed from the power of sin by Christ's death on the cross (when God removed their sinful nature), they would be able to walk in sanctification and properly discern between good and evil, and judge and discipline those among them who continue in sinful behavior and false doctrine. Jesus judged and disciplined those disciples caught in sin; the apostles judged and disciplined those Christians caught in sin; and the elders in the New Testament judged and disciplined those church members caught in sin. Can we do any less if we want to follow their example and instruction? As Paul wrote, "This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may judge and approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ (Philippians 1:9-10)."

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