

“Do not judge!”—“Test the spirits!”—a contradiction?

Jesus' statement that we should not judge otherwise we will be judged is a verse which is often quoted. Usually it is understood that we are not allowed to make any assessing statement about another person because only God knows the heart of man. On the other hand there are many passages in the New Testament which show the importance of assessment (discernment) so that the Apostle John in his first letter even commands to “test the spirits”:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 John 4:1)

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged.”—what does the term “to judge” mean in the New Testament?

First of all we can look at the context of the above mentioned statement of Jesus.

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces. (Matthew 7:1–6)

Jesus was confronted with the religious leaders of the Jews who regarded themselves as righteous and very obedient to God. However, they looked down on other Jews and despised them, condemning them as sinners and being ignorant towards Moses' law. All throughout the gospels we can see that Jesus admonished these Pharisees and scribes because of their hypocritical attitude. They were judging others in the sense of condemning them although they themselves sinned gravely. In applying different standards to others and to themselves, they brought God's judgment on themselves. Jesus' comparison of the other person's sin as a speck and the own sin as plank is a further hint at the Pharisees' thinking that they sin only little. Jesus shows them that it is just the other way around.

It is a misunderstanding to use this passage as an argument that Jesus was against assessing others because these verses themselves show the necessity to do that. Due to right discernment I can recognize my own sin (plank) and the other person's sin (speck) and should remove both. Furthermore Jesus presupposes in verse 6 that we know who are the dogs and pigs whom we should not tell the gospel. This is only possible by right assessment through the Holy Spirit.

The term “to judge” is used in a completely different sense in 1 Cor 5:9–13¹:

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked man from among you.”

The apostle Paul wants the Christians in Corinth to judge the evildoer in their midst. They should exclude

¹ In 1 Corinthians 5:12–13 and Matthew 7:1 the same Greek word “κρίνειν” (krinein = to judge) is used.

him because he does not want to give up his sins. Judging does have a positive meaning here in contrast to Matthew 7. This shows that we always have to look at the context in order not to misunderstand certain verses in the bible. The same term can have different meanings according to its usage in specific contexts. There is no doubt that proper assessment is absolutely necessary in order to avoid an unrighteous exclusion. Exclusion from the church has to be the last step after trying to help the brother who sins to change, as Jesus himself said in Matthew 18:

If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (Matthew 18:15–17)²

Although Jesus does not use the word “to judge” he speaks here about the same as Paul in the letter to the Corinthians. A Christian should not be indifferent towards his brothers but assess their sins and admonish them. Brotherly love just means trying to do everything that can help my brother or sister to live a holy life in close relationship with God. If love is the reason for assessing and judging then it is very different from what Jesus accused many Jews of, who judged according to appearance.

Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment. (John 7:24)³

We should judge justly says Jesus.

“The spiritual man makes judgments about all things”—the necessity of assessing

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man’s judgment. (1 Corinthians 2:14–15)⁴

A Christian is filled with the Holy Spirit and hence, as Paul says, capable to assess everything. An unbeliever will not agree with the thoughts of a Christian because he does not follow God’s standard. The Apostle Paul tells the church in Corinth not to fellowship with unbelievers because they do not have anything in common with them.

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.” (2 Corinthians 6:14–18)

First you have to assess the ungodliness before you can stay away from it and those who practice it. Assessing someone means to neutrally discern his spiritual state in front of God. This provides the basis for making him aware of this and thus giving him the chance to change according to God’s will. The New Testament shows us that it is the task of a Christian to help both his brothers and non-Christians as well to turn to God, either through encouragements or admonitions.

² taken from the New American Standard Bible.

³ Also here the Greek word “κρίνειν” (krinein = to judge) is used.

⁴ The Greek word “ἀνακρίνειν” (anakrinein = to check, to discern, to assess) is used here. It has the word stem of “κρίνειν” (krinein = to judge) but is a different term.

Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned. (Titus 3:10–11)⁵

If the false teacher does not listen he is self-condemned. The warning of the Christian does not judge him but his own disobedience. Separation from godless people is a consequence of right assessment as also Jesus taught his disciples.

If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. (Matthew 10:14)

The Apostle John could not have summarized in simple words who is a Christian if he had not been sure that we can know what is in the heart of man:

This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother. (1 John 3:10)

Everyone assesses many things in daily life – is this not something usual, normal and necessary? If someone says that you should not assess he disproves himself because he has just done it by this very statement of his.

Jesus’ example shows how to encourage and admonish but not to condemn

Jesus’ behavior fits the situation always the best because he was motivated by love and thought of what helps others to be saved. He admonished the Pharisees very strictly in order to show them their self-righteous and proud attitude.

You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. (Matthew 23:24)

You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? (Matthew 23:33)

On the other hand Jesus spoke very gently, inviting those who were willing to see their sins and wanted to seek refuge in God.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28–30)

Jesus was able to do this because he assessed the people very clearly and recognized their spiritual needs. He did not judge them, in the sense of condemning them, but called them out of their sins to a life in the light.

⁵ The Greek word for self-condemned is “αυτοκατάκριτος” (autokatakritos) from the verb “κατακρίνειν” (katakrinein = to condemn). The word stem is again “κρίνειν” (krinein = to judge).