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When It Is Okay to Judge

Confronting sin and enacting judgment within the church.

Introduction

"When It Is Okay to Judge" is not the most inviting sermon title. For many of us, the mere mention of the word "judge"—especially in church—sends shivers down our spines and understandably so. I suspect each of us has had some painful experience of being "judged" by the church.

I was reminded of this on a ride home from the airport once. I got to chatting with the cab driver, who was surprised to hear I was a pastor. "I thought pastors were hard to talk to," he said. I took that as a compliment. So I said, "Hey, you should come to our church." He responded, "But I've been divorced. Wouldn't you judge me? You know, put me over in a corner with all the bad people."

We've all had—or know people who have had—these sorts of painful experiences with the church, and it turns our stomachs to think of inflicting that kind of harsh treatment on someone else, especially in the name of Christ. Compassion for people is one of the reasons we don't like the thought of judging others.

But there are other reasons we struggle with judging others. Of course, we live in a non-judgmental society, where tolerance is the watchword, and where the only thing that's okay to judge is judgment itself. This makes the idea repugnant.

But we also lack moral clarity to judge. What was clear for those a generation or two ago is less clear to us now. As one writer has said, "Where sin is concerned, people mumble now." We lack clarity of conviction, and so we don't speak in clear and articulate terms but rather mumble and hem-and-haw.

We also lack moral confidence to judge. I suspect most of us have a pretty acute sense of our

own sin—that we’re pretty messed up ourselves—and so we find ourselves rightly asking, “Who am I to judge? If anyone is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone.” But we’re all with sin, and thus we’re all tentative to cast judgment on anyone else.

Conceit as the cause for Corinthian inaction

But our passage challenges us to see that there might be another reason why we don’t judge: Conceit. Pride. Arrogance. That’s the reason the Corinthians weren’t taking action and had failed to take action. “And you are arrogant!” Paul says in verse two.

Paul is shocked with what he hears. There is a case of sexual immorality that wouldn’t even be tolerated among non-Christians. But do you know what’s worse than the sexual immorality of this individual? The church’s response to it. They were simply sitting back idly watching, not lifting a finger to do anything about it. Paul see this as the height of arrogance. “And you are arrogant!” he says to them.

Interestingly, we think it’s arrogant to judge others. Paul thinks it’s arrogant not to judge others. How come? Why does he accuse them of arrogance? Perhaps it was related to the man’s social standing. He may have been a person of standing in the community, and so got a pass from everyone in the church. We all know how this works. You give exception to those with influence; they get away with things others don’t.

But there’s something deeper going on. They’re arrogant because they think they can ignore this flagrant sin and remain unharmed themselves. There’s nothing more arrogant than to think that you’re somehow immune to another’s sin.

There’s a famous story told of Muhammad Ali, the legendary boxer, who was on a flight that was ready to take off. The flight attendant asked him, “Mr. Ali, would you please fasten your seat belt? The plane’s about ready to take off.” Ali responded, “Superman doesn’t need a seatbelt.” The flight attendant had the right response: “Superman doesn’t need an airplane, either.”

It’s arrogant to think that you’re immune to harm. That’s the conceit of these Corinthians. They were acting like they didn’t need a seatbelt—or an airplane, for that matter. Pride has blinded them to the seriousness of this man’s sin, but also to the toxic consequences it was having on them as a community.

Corporate solidarity and mourning the sins of others

Instead, Paul sees the only right response to be mourning. “Ought you not rather to mourn?”

he says in verse two. Mourning is the only right response once they realize they are complicit in this man's sin. Their hands are dirty with his sin.

I remember listening to a seasoned pastor describe a heart-breaking situation in his church. Two staff members had fallen into an illicit sexual relationship, and this had gone on for years, with the liaison often happening during the church services themselves—about as awful a scenario as you can imagine. But God brought it to light, and when the preaching pastor found out at a meeting of their eldership, he didn't just sit there on his hands, wondering how they could do such a terrible thing. Instead, he got up from the table, ran to the sanctuary, threw himself down prostrate on the platform, and cried out to God—with loud cries and tears—for mercy upon the church and its ministry. The rest of the elders followed suit and fell down on the ground, prostrate, confessing sin and pleading for God's mercy.

That's a picture of mourning. That's what Paul has in mind when he says they should be mourning rather than boasting. For them, boasting would have been to excuse the sin because of the significance of these two staff members who were so vital to the church's ministry. But instead, the sin was immediately dealt with, and the leadership sought the mercy of God by mourning and repenting.

For those whose hearts and minds are steeped in the worldview of the Bible, there is a sense of corporate solidarity that begins to take hold of your mind and the way you view things. You don't see the people of God as a bunch of individuals who come together as part of some voluntary association once or twice a week; rather, you see it holistically, as a spiritually integrated community where each belongs to the other, and where what one does affects all the others. In short, you see it as a body: where each of the members of the body belong to one another as a single, organic, spiritual person. When one suffers, we all suffer, and when one sins, we all endure—in some sense—the consequences of it.

Severe mercy: enact eschatological judgment ahead of time

Because Paul understands this, his recommendation to the Corinthians is clear. In verse two, he says, "Let him who has done this be removed from among you." But how does this work? And what should the Corinthians do?

Paul explains what this should look like in verses three through five. What he says is that they are to enact the judgment of Jesus on this person. Paul wants them to understand that the Lord Jesus Christ has already pronounced judgment on this person. Their job, as the body of Christ, is simply to enact it in the here and now.

In verse three, Paul says he has already pronounced judgment on the one who did this. His point is not to draw attention to the fact that it is his judgment, but rather—as Jesus’ apostle—that he is speaking authoritatively on Jesus’ behalf. So this is what Jesus thinks, what Jesus himself would do.

Christ is the one who judges this man, not the church, not even Paul. Two phrases in verse four bring this out. First, they assemble “in the name of the Lord Jesus,” and, second, they assemble “with the power of our Lord Jesus.” That is, they gather together under Jesus’ authority and enact his judgment.

Jesus is the one who hands the person over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh. He turns the person over to Satan’s power and influence so the person will be humbled, broken, convicted, and chastened. Ultimately, so the person arrives at a place where he or she is ready to be done with sin. Think about the story of the prodigal son.

When a church does something like this, they do it because they believe Jesus has already ruled in judgment against the person, so the church is simply aligning its actions with the actions of Jesus. But we also need to see how the judgment of the church not only aligns with Jesus’ judgment, but also anticipates God’s final judgment. It’s a proleptic judgment: a verdict given ahead of time, before the final verdict. It is meant to be a severe mercy in this life so there won’t be severe wrath on the Last Day. It’s a gracious wake-up call to the person before it’s too late.

Spiritual integrity and identity: be who you are

It’s clear—from Paul’s perspective, at least—what they should do. But sadly, that’s not what they’re doing. Instead, Paul returns to the root of their inaction: their arrogance, their conceit. “Your boasting is not good,” he says in verse six.

This is tragic because their failure to act is seriously undermining their spiritual integrity, it’s contradicting their identity, and it’s discrediting the sacrifice of Christ. That’s what Paul wants them to understand in verses six through eight.

The church is seriously threatened when there is flagrant, unrepentant sin in its midst. Paul draws on a powerful Old Testament metaphor to drive home this point: leaven. That’s a small lump of dough that is kept over and over and added to a new lump of dough to get it to rise. Paul says that’s what flagrant sin is like within the body.

But notice the gospel logic of things in these verses. They’re to cleanse out the old leaven that

they can become a new lump; not characterized by malice and evil, but marked by sincerity and truth. Yet notice what Paul says, they already are this new unleavened lump. That's their identity in Christ and as Christians. The cleansing of the body is not so they can become something other than what they already are. Rather, it's to embody who Jesus has already made them to be, as we see in verse six: "as you really are unleavened."

Here surfaces a hugely important insight that we find reiterated everywhere. Identity always precedes ethics. Who you are in Christ always comes before what you do in and for Christ. This is gospel-rooted living: the indicative of who you are preceding the imperative of what you are supposed to do. That's gospel logic!

But notice that Paul takes this one step further. He ties our identity to the work of Christ. The church has become God's holy temple—an unleavened, new lump—because of what Christ has done for us. Paul reaches for the story of Passover, when Israel removed the leaven in their exodus from Egypt. In verse seven, Paul then says that Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. The shedding of his blood on the Cross is what makes us a new lump of unleavened bread, God's holy temple. We've been made holy, set apart as saints, through Christ's sacrifice for us.

Not a holy huddle but an authentic missional community

This doesn't mean, however, that we should retreat into holy huddles. Some were evidently tempted to draw that false conclusion. Paul has to address this in verses nine through thirteen.

He'd written to them earlier and said similar sorts of things, and presumably, some of the Corinthians heard this as a call to separate from anyone who was living a sexually immoral life. Living in ancient Corinth, they knew this was a tall order; they were going to have to make plans to leave the city, if not the world, and maybe get a place on one of those rockets going to Mars in 2024.

But, of course, that's not at all what Paul is saying. Yes, he says, you're to break fellowship with the sexually immoral—in verse 10, he clarifies, "not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters," and for one simple reason: "since then you would need to go out of the world."

No, Jesus has called the church to be in the world but not of the world. That's what Paul's trying to get at here. It's far easier, of course, to avoid being of the world by not being in the world. Many Christians have chosen the path. But it misses the point.

Rather, Paul says in verse 11, "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," that is, anyone who persists in calling himself Christian while engaging in flagrant, unrepentant sin.

Note the punch-line in verse 12: "For what have I to do with judging outsiders?" Answer: I don't. That's not my place, or any Christian's place. That's God's prerogative. He'll take care of that. The church's task, on the other hand, is to care for itself. As we see in verses 12 and 13, "Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. 'Purge the evil person from among you.'"

You see, Christians tend to judge those outside, but give a pass to those inside. We have lots of forceful things to say about non-Christians, but often mumble when it comes to those within our own body. This is sad because it leaves those outside the church with the impression that we are— first of all—judgmental, and then, secondly, hypocritical. But what if we reversed this? What sort of missional impact would we have?

What do we learn?

This passage has much to teach us: first, about the nature of sin. It's not a private possession; it has corporate and community impact. Think twice before you do something to dishonor the name of Christ because it will impact more than just yourself. You are part of the body of Christ, and each belongs to the other.

But secondly, we learn about the nature of the church. It is a holy temple, the place where God dwells. This is not simply some random association of individuals who happen to like gathering in this building on a Sunday morning. We are a spiritual community, connected spiritually to one another by the spirit of Christ. When one suffers, we all suffer. When one sins, we all struggle. We're connected, spiritually.

We learn about the work of Christ. He is our Passover Lamb, whose wonderful sacrifice for our sins sets us free and brings us into a community of believers who—together with us—pursue this freedom and seek to live it out.

We learn about the holiness of God. We fail to take discipline seriously because we fail to take the holiness of God seriously. The holiness of God is just not a major concern. It's an important doctrinal affirmation, yes, and it's of theological interest, perhaps. But it's not a lifestyle-shaping concern to help us determine how we live in the here and now, day-to-day, nitty-gritty of our ordinary lives. Holiness is like background noise, not dance music; it doesn't really

shape and inspire, but simply lingers in the atmosphere.

Lastly, we learn about the mission of the church. I suspect our witness to the world would be far more powerful if we pursued greater authenticity as a body. When we tolerate sin within our own midst and yet decry sin in the outside world, we send the worst kind of mixed message. But when we're serious about sin and about the gospel of God's grace and forgiveness, the world takes notice because they see an authentic witness, marked by integrity and not hypocrisy.

Conclusion

When is it okay—indeed, even necessary—to judge another Christian?

It is okay to judge another Christian when the sin is flagrant and unrepentant. Not the little garden variety struggle we all have, or even the more serious missteps we all take when they're followed by repentance.

It is okay to judge another Christian when the offending person continues to profess faith and claims to be a Christian. If they reject their faith and deny Christ and leave the church, that is their prerogative, and they've taken care of the matter themselves.

It is okay to judge another Christian when the church has gathered in the name of Jesus, under the authority of his Word and with the power of his Spirit. This is not the prerogative of individuals, something that can be decided by a few folks in a small group on some Thursday afternoon. It's the solemn work of the body of Christ.

It is okay to judge another Christian when the aim and intent is restorative rather than retributive: when you ultimately want to see the person repent and be restored rather than suffer or simply be punished.

It is okay to judge another Christian when the person's presence in the church threatens to undermine the church's spiritual integrity. The church is not a club or a voluntary association; it is instead God's holy temple, the place where his Spirit dwells. This is who you are, as God's people. As Paul says in [1 Corinthians 3:16-17](#), "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."

Todd Wilson

Topics: [Arrogance](#); [Church, mission of](#); [Community](#); [Identity](#); [Integrity](#); [Judgment](#)

Scripture: [1 Corinthians 5:1-12](#)

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