

Are Christians Allowed to Judge?

What the Bible Says About Judging and Assessing

The aim of this article

Is assessment necessarily something negative? Do the terms “assess” and “judge” mean the same thing? Is it possible and are we permitted to look into the heart of another person and assess them, or is that up to God alone? In the following article we will present our reasons for believing that assessment plays an important role in a person’s relationship with God and in church life.

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⚓ 1 Introductory Thoughts on Jesus’ Statement: “Judge not!”

A phrase that can be often heard among people belonging to various Christian denominations is the Bible passage:

“Judge not, that you be not judged.” (*Matthew 7:1*)

Many people think that every person stands before God alone and that no-one else can say anything objective about the life and actions of another person, and certainly not in matters concerning his salvation (whether or not someone is saved). Other people’s lives, especially in the area of religion, are seen as a kind of private sphere that is largely or completely “taboo” for outsiders. Consequently, every kind of critique is regarded as judgement and intolerance, an illegal violation of this “sacred personal space”. People have a similar approach when it comes to assessing and evaluating the beliefs and teachings of different religious groups. But if one considers the opinion or teaching of a group to be erroneous, the necessary conclusion is that they are travelling down the wrong path. In the following text we want to examine this question in the light of Jesus’ words and the Christian teaching.

⚓ 2 The Difference Between Assessing and Judging

Assessing and judging are regarded by many as being the same although **there is an important difference** between the two terms. The term “assess” is not necessarily negative since it simply means taking a stance on what is good and bad, right and wrong and is actually just the practical application of the principles revealed by God in the Bible. Discerning between good and bad is just as important in our spiritual life as it is concerning earthly matters. For many people words like judging and judgement have negative connotations and imply a bad attitude. Assessment, on the other hand, comes from the desire to get to know and accept the truth about a matter, and to be able to help others. If the motivation to help is lacking, even a completely justified and appropriate admonition will become a loveless and merciless

condemnation. There are several passages in the Bible which speak against self-righteous and pharisaic judgement (e. g. Matthew 9:9-13; Luke 18:9-14 etc.). In the following well-known and, unfortunately often misinterpreted warning, **Jesus referred to this very unloving attitude:**

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgement you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye", when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. (*Matthew 7:1-5*)

The passage addresses a haughty and hypocritical person who self-righteously points at the sins of other people without wanting to take notice of his own. **It does not mean that we are forbidden to remove the speck from our brother's eye.** Jesus criticized the condemning attitude using this picture and appeals to us to have an honest, humble and self-critical attitude and turn from our own sins. Then we will be able to help others: "...then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (verse 5). What Jesus says here gives no support to the widespread opinion that another person's "specks" or sins are none of my business. Everyone experiences a speck in their eye as a great discomfort. It would be unloving not to want to help.

The parallel passage to Matthew 7:1-5 is found in Luke 6:37-42:

Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; (*Luke 6:37*)

Here we find a parallel between Jesus' warning against judging and a warning against condemning and the appeal to forgive other people. These parallels show that judging is meant here in the sense of condemning and the unwillingness to forgive others.

Two verses later (verse 39), Jesus asks, "*Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?*" That is to say, if someone does not admit his own sins, he cannot receive God's forgiveness. Consequently, he is unable pass on God's grace and love to other people. He is unable to show other people the way out of their sins. However, if someone admits and regrets his sins he receives forgiveness and will be motivated by thankfulness and love to want to help others also find reconciliation with God:

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgement. ...Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. (*Psalms 51:2-4,12-13*)

So the parallel passage from Luke 6:37–42 makes it even clearer that Jesus' intention in Matthew 7:1–5 was to warn people against judging in a hypocritical and unloving way without examining themselves in front of God.

The context of these verses about not judging in both gospels encourages sober criticism and assessment: We are compelled to ask ourselves, "Who is worthy of receiving our pearls?" [1], "Who is it who will not enter the kingdom of God?" Jesus tells us we will recognize false prophets according to their fruits—which is a direct invitation to make an assessment.

⚓ 3 What is the Significance of Assessment in our Relationship with God?

In this world corrupted by sin, someone who seeks what is good must test everything thoroughly. Paul exposes the danger of deception quite drastically in 2 Corinthians 11:14–15:

And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

God, in his great mercy and love, has shown us the way to Himself through Jesus, which everyone has the freedom to choose. He has also exposed wickedness and sin for what they are.

You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. (*John 15:14–15*)

If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. (*John 15:22–24*)

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (*John 8:31–32*)

It is only possible to live with God if we want to live in the truth that God has laid as a foundation (Romans 12:1–2). Finding, and most importantly acting according to the truth and exposing and abstaining from falsehood are therefore prime necessities. If someone does not do this, they will miss the path to eternal life.

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (*Matthew 7:13–14*)

But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. (*John 4:23–24*)

Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does

not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. (2 John 8-9)

The following example can illustrate more precisely what we mean.

If someone is preparing a dish of mushrooms, will he not first make sure that each of the mushrooms is edible and not poisonous? No doubt! How much more carefully should we test everything in matters concerning our relationship with God and our salvation? Two people who make opposing and contradictory statements about the same issue cannot both be right. This is also valid for questions of biblical doctrine, as in the following examples:

Does God determine the eternal destiny of people (predestination), or do we have a free will? Does hell exist, or do all people go to God? Is the Holy Spirit a person or just a power? Can someone lose his salvation, or is that impossible? Do humans have a sinful nature or not?

There are many more examples of doctrines from various religious groups and churches we could name, which, as the above mentioned points, are not merely abstract theological discussions, but which have a fundamental impact on our lives. In fact, these very contradictions require all who search earnestly for the truth to ask themselves, "What is truth? What is God like? How can I live a life pleasing to Him? How can we find true peace and fulfillment in God?"

Hence, we find many exhortations in the Bible to test and assess everything and everyone.

...for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. (Ephesians 5:8-11)

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22)

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. (Matthew 7:15-20)

⚓ 4 The Importance of Assessment in the Life of the Christian Community

Assessment and love are very closely connected. In order to give our brothers and sisters the help that God really wants to give them, we need to try to understand where they are at in their relationship with God—what are their weaknesses and sins and where they need help—by considering their life and deeds. If someone desires to please God, he will be grateful for this help.

Sadly, many religious people are too proud and feel offended when you address problems in their spiritual life. It is certainly easier for everyone if, in order to avoid a probable conflict, you avoid confronting another person with his errors and calling him to repentance. This very attitude, however, of choosing a seemingly easier way, led the Christian communities of the early centuries to several disastrous changes:

- **Christians stopped sharing their lives openly with their brothers and sisters.** Brotherly

affection and love were no longer natural and as a result, they could no longer be sure about their brothers' spiritual state.

- Parallel to the perceivable decrease in the practice of admonition and church discipline, **their fight for sanctification became less and less intense.** The “smaller” sins remained hidden, and the congregations applied stricter measures only in the case of obvious transgressions that often reached a very worldly level.
- The lack of necessary help, admonition and encouragement and the unwillingness to exclude hardened sinners provided rich soil for the **churches to be watered down by the presence of many pseudo-Christians and unbelievers.**
- **Persons who were swift to action and had good organizational abilities**, and who were able to give a good impression—**gained great influence and authority.** They assumed “leading positions” in the congregations and their decisions and actions were not and could not be examined by the whole church.
- As a consequence of these things, Christianity opened itself up to **false teachings and false concepts of God.** The church ceased to be an example that assesses the world and calls it to a change of life.

Foreseeing these dangers, the Bible motivates us to **take responsibility for our brothers and sisters**, to encourage and admonish them. Only in this way is it possible to maintain the love and purity that are in accordance with God's will in the church.

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today”, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (*Hebrews 3:12-13*)

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, NASB*)

But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people. 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 person from among you.” (*1 Corinthians 5:11-13, NIV*)

Besides the urgent call to encourage our brothers we find many examples of how the **Christians guarded the teaching and the church**, which is the “*pillar and buttress of the truth*” (1 Timothy 3:15).

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world... We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error. (1 John 4:1, 6)

I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. (Revelation 2:2)

The following passage shows us how natural it was for the first century communities to assess people whom they wanted to help to come to repentance:

But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. (1 Corinthians 14:24–25)

Jesus himself showed people clearly what separates them from God (e.g. Matthew 23:13–36 and 19:16–22), even though he knew that by this he would make enemies for himself. If we want to help others to find God, **we must follow Jesus' example**, even if it means facing conflicts and rejection, just as Jesus did.

In summary we can say that the kind of assessment that the Bible talks about means lovingly showing people on the basis of God's word what God's ways are and where they are not living in accordance with them. Jesus wasn't alone in doing this. He instructed his disciples and everyone who wants to follow him to do the same. The prerequisite is that we examine and assess our own lives according to the standard of the Bible, submitting ourselves to God in humility and obedience. The New Testament confirms this practice in many passages. Assessment is, in itself, not a negative term. Rather it is inseparably linked to loving the truth, our brothers and sisters, and all people.

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Footnotes

1. Matthew 7:6

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