JUDGING, PRE-JUDGING, AND PREJUDICE

By Andy Diestelkamp

Perhaps one of the best known statements of Jesus is “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matthew 7:1). Ironically, it is often cited by people to *critique* those by whom they feel criticized. However, Jesus is not condemning all critiques of others. This is made evident by: 1) the inconsistency created if His words are taken as an absolute prohibition, 2) the immediate context (vs. 5), and 3) the larger context of Scripture which actually requires making judgments (e.g. Jn. 7:24; 1 Cor. 5).  
 Contextually, what Jesus is condemning is inconsistent and hypocritical judgment. He is addressing the proclivity we have to judge others more critically than we judge ourselves. Of course, this tendency easily produces numerous misjudgments and prejudices against individuals and their “ilk” which, if unchecked by self-control and sound thinking, leads to a host of generational and cultural prejudices which cause strife and division.

Jesus is prioritizing self-critique as being necessarily first in order to then be able to adequately help others with their problems. This does not require perfection from us before forming an opinion, offering a critique, or rendering a judgment. This is again evident by the fact that we are called to do so, yet none of us can rightly claim perfection. For example, parents are not perfect in their own lives or in their parenting, but this reality does not forbid them to train their children (Eph. 6:4) which will, of necessity, require critiques and judgments. Still, humility and love must temper all discipline.

God created us to learn, discern, critique, and make judgments. As thinking people, we are constantly doing this; and such judgments are naturally made through the lens of our own limited experiences. This is one of the ways in which we both prosper and attempt to protect ourselves from harm. For example, a woman who was sexually molested by a man will naturally have a tendency to be wary of males. Thus, when she is approached by a male, she may become nervous. Based on her experience, she is making a judgment that she is in potential danger. This is a pre-judgment. Any circumstance which departs from the norm of perceived safety is immediately judged as suspect. This is a natural process and is not inherently wrong.

However, we are not mere animals who must react with “fight or flight” when confronted by these conditioned responses. As beings created in the image of God, we can and are expected to exercise self-control. We can reason that our initial reaction based on limited information is not logically or justly applicable to all persons despite our experiences and, therefore, does not require “fight or flight.” Thus we check our initial judgments with sober-mindedness, patience, mercy, and love and temper prejudicial responses and behaviors. This is how the mind of the spirit controls the reactions of the flesh and thus bears good fruit (cf. Gal. 5:16-26).

Judgments happen in a host of circumstances daily for all of us about everything from the mundane to sublime, from the harmless to the serious. When I experience anything with any of my five senses, my brain immediately begins to process it and make judgments despite the fact that I do not yet have all information necessary to make an accurate or fair judgment; but this fact alone does not stop my brain from thinking or making such judgments. Thus, one intuitively evaluates and makes judgments about everyone’s motives and attitudes and potential based on their appearances, words, and actions. By experience we know that many pre-judgments are inaccurate. Still, while acknowledging that “you can’t judge a book by its cover,” we will look at the cover and make an initial judgment.

This is why it is imperative that God’s Word be the foundation of our learning. Indeed, the ability to discern good from evil is a sign of spiritual maturity (Heb. 5:14). Without doubt, the culture in which we are raised and the values imparted by our parents and society at large are formative to the kinds of judgments we make. This is why we need to create a culture of Christ in our hearts and our homes so as to be better people and render better judgments in all cases.

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