

***I know that we are told that we shouldn't judge, but what does that mean? Shouldn't we be able to judge some things?***

This is a big issue. Not only because it is kind of important to listen when Jesus gives a command, but also because this seems to be the most oft-quoted Scripture verse that non-believers use when talking to Christians. You've been there: you get into a conversation with an atheist and the topic of morality comes up. You say something about how a particular behavior is wrong, and then, if your friend is not very honest, he may start quoting back to you the words of Jesus ("Judge not"), thereby stifling all discussion. There are really countless scenarios to this, and I admit, some of them are justified, but does "judge not" mean that we can't make any judgments at all?

Absolutely not. (How's that for direct?) Every time we approach the Bible, we need to take God's Word as a whole. If we want to truly begin to understand what Jesus is getting at, we need to keep what He says in context. Once we begin taking Jesus' words out of context, Jesus is then reduced to a caricature. You know, one of those drawings they do at the State Fair where the artist accents certain more pronounced features and de-emphasizes others. The result is something that kind of looks like the real person, but isn't all that accurate (at least I hope not...or else I have a really, really large mouth).

To get a true picture of Jesus, we read the Bible as a whole and with the Church. This is really the only guarantee that our picture of Jesus is not just what we want to see. Anything else is really just us making God in our image. So, taking the Bible as a whole, we don't need to go very far to realize that Jesus basically lays out two kinds of judging (simply look at Chapter Seven of Matthew's Gospel). With these two kinds of judging, we find that Jesus forbids one kind, but he actually commands the other kind of judgment. The first involves presuming to know the "heart" of another person and making a judgment that leads to condemnation.

This seems to make sense. There are many times when we might experience the temptation to pronounce judgment on the person. We are forbidden to judge the heart of a person. But we must judge actions and consequences. There are many factors that act on and in a person that might incline them to evil in a way that you or I have no concept of. Now, this does not make a wrong action right. It doesn't affect the evil of the thing chosen, but it could mitigate the degree to which a person is culpable for their choice. I'm sure that we are all aware of a situation where a person does some evil out of fear or after a long suffering. We don't know the entirety of the situation. We don't know all of the factors that work on a particular person that might lead to their choosing evil (or their choosing good, for that matter). Only God knows all of these things, which is why judgment is reserved for God alone.

At the same time, we are commanded to judge actions. In this same chapter, Jesus says, "Beware of false prophets". How do we know if someone is a false prophet? How do we make that judgment? Well, Jesus tells us: "By their fruits you will know them". We make judgments on the information that we have access to. We make informed judgments. We make judgments based off of what we know. All of the information about someone's interior life is off-limits to us. It is an unknown. Therefore, we may not say anything about it. But what is known to us? Well, we can see their actions, we can hear their words...essentially, we can see their fruits.

All of us do this justly every day. When you tell your children that they may not have permission to play with those boys whom you know behave badly in school and in the neighborhood. You do it when you decide not to become business partners with a guy whom you know swindled his last three business partners. You do it when you decide that it is time to break up with your girlfriend after the third time she has lied to you. We must be prepared to make those judgments based off of what we know. We must be prepared to identify evil for what it is...as well as good for what it is. This is not being "judgmental"; this is being wise.

One last word of warning after all of this: the call not to judge hearts is a serious one. So is the command to judge actions. But in all things, love must dominate. Love moves us to extend the benefit of the doubt when we don't know the entire situation. Love moves us to speak the hard word of telling our friends when they have gone off track. And love is always quick to forgive when forgiveness is asked for.