

Making Right Judgment?

John 7:14-24

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

14 About the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and began teaching. 15 The Jews therefore marveled, saying, "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?" 16 So Jesus answered them, "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me. 17 If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. 18 The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood. 19 Has not Moses given you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why do you seek to kill me?" 20 The crowd answered, "You have a demon! Who is seeking to kill you?" 21 Jesus answered them, "I did one work, and you all marvel at it. 22 Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. 23 If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well? 24 Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment."

– John 7:14-24

Judge Not? How Do We Discern Truth?

Reportedly, several years ago, Matthew 7:1 replaced John 3:16 as the most quoted verse from the Bible. John 3:16 has been cherished by Christians for centuries as a powerful summary of the Gospel in one verse: *"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."* Matthew 7:1 is, *"Judge not, lest you be judged."* I also heard that the most quoted verse was actually from 1 John 4, *"God is love."* Sometimes you hear these two together: *"God is love, you know, so judge not, lest you be judged."*

Now, I never could find any evidence that any of these verses was ever officially "the verse most often quoted by Americans" or even how someone would measure that. But enough preachers mentioned it in sermons and even wrote about it in books, so that means it must be right, right? Well, here's what does seem right: a clear and concise understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ does seem to have been replaced in the minds of many professing Christians by a fuzzy, all-embracing tolerance.

What did Jesus mean and not mean when He famously said, *"Judge not, lest you be judged"*? Here in John 7, Jesus tells the Jewish leaders of His day, *"Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment."* What does that mean and does it contradict what He said in Matthew 7:1? In Matthew 7:1, Jesus was speaking against the very common human tendency to hypocritically condemn others in our minds. It's very similar to what He meant when He said, *"Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye and not see the log that is in your own eye?"* We are so good at spotting sin in others and condemning them for it, while we are so slow to see the sin in our own lives, aren't we?

Here's what Jesus didn't mean: He didn't mean, *"Don't be discerning. There is no such thing as right and wrong, truth and falsehood, so just be accepting of everything without making distinctions or filtering anything out."* That would not only be a false teaching, but it would be impossible. We all make judgments all the time. We regard certain things as true and others as false. We embrace some things as good and reject others as bad. Life would be impossible without doing this.

In today's passage, Jesus is confronting the Jewish religious leaders and the crowds because they are making poor judgments, based on appearances and superficial religiosity and not based on truth. In explaining and defending His own teachings and actions, Jesus gives us wonderful guidance for how we can "judge with right judgment" as we live our lives as believers.

A. The Right Will, vv. 14-17

¹⁴ About the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and began teaching. ¹⁵ The Jews therefore marveled, saying, "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?" ¹⁶ So Jesus answered them, "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me. ¹⁷ If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority.

Our passage in John 7 picks up in the middle of the Feast of Tabernacles. Jesus' brothers had encouraged Him to go up to Jerusalem publicly at the beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles and do some spectacular public miracle, to gain a larger following for His campaign to be the Messiah. The religious leaders had looked for Jesus at the beginning of the Feast, waiting for Him to do exactly as His brothers had suggested. But Jesus wasn't campaigning for the office of Messiah, and He wasn't going to play the role of public spectacle. He would, however, take the opportunity to publicly teach people gathered in the Temple the truth about God and His kingdom.

The Temple courtyard was a large public space where many rabbis would commonly take their seats and begin teaching. Even today, part of this area of the Temple Mound remains, around the Western Wall, the only remaining intact wall from Herod's Temple. Also known as the Wailing Wall, the Temple courtyard around the Western Wall is today a large open-air synagogue, where many rabbis can be seen, some teaching, others praying, still others celebrating Bar-Mitzvahs. It was here that Jesus took His seat and began to teach.

His teaching caused a level of astonishment because Jesus had never been trained in any of the major rabbinical schools, and He had never been a disciple of one of the prominent rabbis. He had a level of knowledge of the Scriptures and of theological truth that seemed impossible for the son of a carpenter from Nazareth, the leader of a group of Galilean fishermen. Yes, Jesus' teaching may hold the country folk spellbound in backward, uneducated Galilee, but here He was teaching in the Temple, speaking powerfully. People were astonished. They wanted to know how He got His education.

So Jesus answered them, "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me." Good rabbis in Jesus' day would always quote other rabbis, always appealing to the rabbinical tradition of which they were a part. It was considered arrogant and presumptuous for a rabbi to simply state his own opinion on a text. Jesus never quoted any rabbis, and He was not affiliated with any rabbinical school. But He wanted people to know that He was not just making things up. He was sent out and authorized by the greatest teacher of all, the source of truth, God Himself.

But wasn't Jesus also God? Couldn't He then just appeal to His own authority? As we progress in John's Gospel, Jesus will make His own divinity more clear. But Jesus was truly man, even as He was

truly God. He had, and continues to have, two natures, being both God and man. The man Christ Jesus, who is the Messiah and the mediator, as a faithful man, was filled with the Holy Spirit and depended on the wisdom of His Father in everything. He was sent into the world by the Father and He looked to the Father for all truth, even as we are called to do.

So the first test we have in wanting to judge with right judgment is to check the source: Where does this idea come from? Where did this teaching originate? If we're thinking about a particular preacher or teacher, where did he get his ideas? It would be arrogant for a preacher today to rely on his own wisdom and ideas, just as surely as it would have been in Jesus' day.

How can we know? Well, this connects with the second test, with which we can check our own hearts. Jesus says: *"If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority."* What are you seeking from the teaching you're receiving, from the book you're reading, from the blog you're following, from the podcast to which you listen? What is your will? Is your will to do the will of God, or are you looking for something else? Do you just want a quick fix for a happier life? Are you yearning to be successful, to be well liked by others? Is your goal to follow God or to win friends and influence people?

We need the right will, the right intention, the right disposition of heart, if we are to be discerning and to receive right teaching. Of course, only God truly knows our hearts or can change our hearts, so we need to go to Him continually in prayer, asking Him to show us our own deep heart motivations and to change our hearts to reflect His heart.

B. The Right Glory, vv. 18-20

From having the right disposition of heart, Jesus then shifts to talk about having the right goal, the right outcome in view. In doing so, He contrasts seeking two different glories: ¹⁸*The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood.* ¹⁹*Has not Moses given you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why do you seek to kill me?"* ²⁰*The crowd answered, "You have a demon! Who is seeking to kill you?"*

Jesus contrasts two goals: seeking your own glory vs. seeking the glory of God. It is interesting how Jesus contrast these two glories. He says, *"the one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory."* This is probably very close to what the religious leaders were accusing Jesus of doing. Since He never quoted any of the great rabbis, He seemed to be speaking on His own authority. Far from it! Instead, it was the Jewish religious leaders who spoke on their own authority, despite the fact that they quoted great rabbis to support their interpretations, The reality is that they manipulated the Scriptures to say what they wanted to say. They chose which rabbi to quote to spin the interpretation the way they wanted it to sound.

Why did they do this? Because they were seeking their own glory. The religious leaders were actively involved in a secret plot to arrange to have Jesus arrested and put to death. Their pretense for wanting

to do this was the healing of the paralyzed man on the Sabbath day that Jesus had done the last time He was in Jerusalem.

If we look back at John 5, we can see what happened. After Jesus healed the paralyzed man, we are told,

“The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. ¹⁶ And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.”

This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

– John 5:15-18, ESV

To the Jewish religious leadership, Jesus was a threat. He was a threat to their glory. They held sway over God’s people, holding positions of power and authority because they were the anointed spiritual leadership of God’s people, the ones who represented God to the people of God. Now some competition was moving in on their turf, performing spectacular, undeniable public miracles and claiming that God was His Father. They wanted to get rid of Jesus, and the Law of Moses provided them with the perfect excuse.

Jesus called their bluff. He told the truth: None of them kept the Law of Moses. If they did, they wouldn’t be conspiring to have Him killed.

The crowd reacts with shock and outrage at Jesus’ accusation. They simply cannot believe that their revered spiritual leaders could be plotting to murder an innocent man. So they accuse Jesus of having a demon, of being out of His mind, as we would say in our culture. But of course, we know that Jesus’ accusation is right. He is also right in His diagnosis of the cause for their murderous plot. They are not seeking to guard the Law of Moses, which they don’t even keep themselves, but rather they are seeking to guard their own glory, which is what they really serve.

The goal of our lives is either our own glory or the glory of God. The way we seek our own glory might be through religion or through our career, through serving others or through trying to get rich. Yet if it is our glory we are seeking, we will not be able to see clearly, judge rightly or act righteously. We need to live for more than ourselves. Our glory, such as it is, is petty and fleeting.

The glory of God is the only glory worth living for, for it is the only true eternal glory. If we live for the glory of God, we may suffer for His glory in this life, but such suffering soon comes to an end. The Apostle Paul knew the surpassing greatness of living for the glory of God. In 2 Corinthians 4:15-18, he is speaking of his apostolic Gospel ministry and his sufferings, and he says,

“ . . . it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” – 2 Cor. 4:15-18, ESV

Do we know the joy and peace of living for the glory of God, living for the unseen and eternal weight of glory which is far beyond all comparison?

C. The Right Spirit, vv. 21-24

Jesus goes on to respond to the crowd’s accusations by exposing the cause of the leadership’s plot against Him and to redirect the way the religious leaders and the crowds should be thinking about the law of Moses:

²¹ Jesus answered them, “I did one work, and you all marvel at it. ²² Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath.²³ If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man’s whole body well? ²⁴ Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.”

Jesus calls the crowd’s attention back to the one work He did publicly on the Sabbath in Jerusalem a year earlier. This wasn’t Jesus’ only miracle, nor was it His only healing done on the Sabbath, but it was the one public healing He did on the Sabbath in Jerusalem, in the shadow of the Temple.

The significance of what Jesus is saying here is missing in the ESV, because the translators of the ESV left out the connection between verse 21 and verse 22. The New American Standard gets it right. It renders verses 21-22 like this:

Jesus answered them, “I did one deed, and you all marvel. ²² For this reason Moses has given you circumcision (not because it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and on the Sabbath you circumcise a man.

“For this reason” is a strong causal connection in the Greek. Jesus is saying that He did a miraculous work of healing a man and everyone was amazed, but it was for this reason that Moses gave the people the rite of circumcision. What does He mean? He is saying that the religious leaders not only fail to keep the Law of Moses, but they also fail to understand it’s purpose, the reason for which it was given.

Circumcision was given to God’s people to show them their need – their need of healing, cleansing and restoring because of the guilt, pollution and brokenness brought into the world and their lives because of sin. The Sabbath was given to show God’s people their need for true and eternal rest. Jesus came in the fulfillment of the Law of Moses, because the Law of Moses was given to show God’s people their need in a way that only Jesus could fulfill.

The Jewish religious leaders thought it was appropriate to circumcise a baby on the Sabbath day, thus “breaking” the Sabbath to fulfill the higher duty of circumcision a child. How much more appropriate is it for Jesus to heal a man’s whole body, in fulfillment of the reason why circumcision was given?

This gets to heart of the spirit of the Law vs. the letter of the Law, or – as I think it is better to put it, the true Spirit of the Law vs. the spirit of legalism. The spirit of legalism says that good people keep the rules and they’re good because they keep the rules because keeping the rules is good. The true Spirit of the Law, the Holy Spirit who gives the Law and who writes it on our hearts, shows us that the purpose of the law is to show us God’s character and our need. Ultimately, the law shows us how righteous, holy and wise God is as well as how needy, broken and guilty we are, so we can know our need for Jesus and come to Him for salvation.

The spirit of legalism is the spirit of self-justification, of wanting to be able to compare myself to other people and declare myself righteous. The true Spirit of the Law looks to God Himself and sees how perfect He is, then realizes how far short we fall of His glory, and – seeking His glory – longs for redemption and healing, found only in Jesus. So the Spirit of the Law will always lead us to Jesus, for that is the reason why God gave us the Law.

For the religious leaders of Jesus’ day to be able to make right judgments, and for us to be able to make right judgments, thus requires the right will, seeking the right glory and keeping in step with the right Spirit. Our will must be to do the will of God, for the glory of God, empowered by the Spirit of God. Only when we’re doing so can we know and discern and judge rightly.

Who Is Really on Trial?

The confrontation in today’s passage between Jesus and the religious leaders and the crowd began as an attempt by the religious leaders to put Jesus on trial: Who does this guy think He is anyway? Where does He get off talking like this? Very quickly, though, it was no longer Jesus who was on trial but the religious leaders and the crowd that followed them.

That’s how it is when we have a true encounter with Jesus. If you’re here this morning, and you’re not following Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you might think you’re evaluating Him, to see whether or not He’s worth following, whether or not He is all that people say He is. You might be wondering who this Jesus really is and why people make such a big fuss about Him. But do you realize that you’re really the one who’s on trial, that it’s your heart and my heart, your character and my character, your will and my will, that Jesus is examining right now? Before you think to question or examine Him, have you realized how you are being questioned and examined by Him?

Who do you think you are? Who do I think I am? What is your will? What is mine? Is it to do the will of God? Whose glory are we seeking, is it the glory of God or our own glory? What spirit are we following, the spirit of self-justifying, self-exalting legalism or the Holy Spirit who convicts us of our need and leads us to Jesus?

We need to let Jesus expose our own hearts and motivations to us, through His word and His Spirit, and then we need to come to Him for the healing and rest He alone can give!