

Be Careful about Judging

A young minister graduated from seminary just before World War I, and he was appointed to a church in a very small town.

He had been there only a couple of weeks when he received a call every new minister dreads – the call to do his first funeral. The person who had died was not a member of his church. She was, in fact, a woman with a very bad reputation.

Her husband was a railroad engineer who was away from home much of the time. She had rented rooms in their house to men who worked on the railroad, and rumor had it that she rented more than just rooms when her husband was away.

The young preacher, faced with his first funeral, found no one who had a good word to say about this woman – until he entered the small, old-fashioned grocery store on the day before the funeral. He began to talk to the store owner about his sadness that the first person he would bury would be someone about which nothing good could be said.

The store owner didn't reply at first, and then, in his silence, he appeared to make a decision. He took out his store ledger and laid it on the counter between him and the preacher. He opened the ledger at random and, covering the names in the left-hand column, he pointed to grocery bills written in red – groceries that people had bought on credit – and then the column that showed the bills had been paid.

“Every month,” he said, “that woman would come in and ask me who was behind in their grocery bills. It was usually some family who had sickness or death, or some poor woman trying to feed her kids when her husband drank up the money. She would pay their bill, and she made me swear not to tell.”

The store owner got quiet for a moment and glanced toward the ceiling.

Then he spoke slowly. “But I figure now that she is dead, people ought to know – especially those who benefited from her charity who have been most critical of her.”

That's a powerful lesson, and one that should give all of us pause.

Opportunities for judging others are readily available. A summons for jury duty expects us to impartially judge the culpability of an individual. During an election we judge, by comparison, each candidate's integrity. Pronouncing judgment upon others seems human nature.



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Our fondness of judging others extends far beyond legal or civic matters. People are especially good at speaking out against all kinds of things they find offensive. Sadly, their focus may center on the person instead of the action.

This does not mean that we should never make judgments. Obviously, we make judgments every day. We judge between right and wrong, dangerous choices from safe ones, etc. Here are some points the Bible makes about judging others: (1) Don't judge anyone by your human limitations, since only God's judgments are flawless; (2) Don't be quick to condemn someone else's actions; (3) Don't attack each other – try to be a good example so others won't copy your bad behavior; and (4) Don't speak destructive things about others. Are you qualified to perfectly judge someone else?

Jesus knew humans would struggle with judging and He issued a stern warning:
Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye (Matthew 7:1-5 ESV).

We shouldn't be habitually critical of someone when our own sin needs corrected as well.

– Beecher Hunter