

Love and assessment

INTRODUCTION

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged!" is a phrase that can be often heard among people belonging to various Christian denominations. Every person must stand before God and will be held to account for how he lived. No one else is able to express an objective opinion about another person's life and deeds especially not in matters concerning his salvation. The religious life of other people is essentially seen as a kind of private sphere that is largely or completely "taboo" for outsiders. So every kind of critique is regarded as judgement and intolerance, an illegal violation of this "sacred personal space". People go about assessing the teachings of different denominations in a similar way. For 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 pages we would like to deal with the question of how the notion that 'one cannot (or must not) assess another person' stands up in the light of the Christian teaching and life.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ASSESSEMENT AND JUDGEMENT

Assessment and judgement are regarded by many as being the same although there is an important difference between the two terms. The term assessment is not necessarily negative since it means just taking a stance on what is good and bad, right and wrong. This means applying the principles of the Bible to practical situations. Discerning between good and bad is just as important in the spiritual life as it is concerning the earthly matters. For many people words like condemnation and judgement have negative connotations and imply a bad attitude. Assessment though, which derives from the desire to get to know the truth, is the first step to being able to help. If the motivation to help is lacking, even a completely righteous and correct judgement can turn into a loveless and merciless condemnation. There are several more 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 parable, Jesus rejected just this loveless attitude.

Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at 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,' and behold, the log is 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)

An essential element of this warning is that the addressee is a haughty and hypocritical person who self-righteously lays much emphasis on the sins of others without noticing his own iniquities. So nothing is said about the prohibition of removing the speck from your brother's eye. Jesus just condemned the way it was done, that is he condemned the bad attitude. Jesus' central thought is that we have to see our own sins graver than those of others. This means self-criticism and turning away from our sins. In this way, we will be able to help others. "Why do you look at the speck ...and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" Even the simile used in this parable is inadequate to support that widespread thinking that "another person's specks/sins are none of my business" since a speck is a cause of discomfort in everybody's eyes. The parallel passage to the one above is found in Luke 6:37-42. This passage makes it even clearer that Jesus' very intention was to warn against loveless judging with his parable above:

Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven...

The message of the other parables (e.g. Matthew 7:6 and 15-23, Luke 6:43-46) considered in the context of the passages quoted from the gospels of Matthew and Luke encourages sober criticism and assessment (We are compelled to ask ourselves, "Who is unworthy of receiving our pearls?" "Who is it who will not enter the kingdom of God?" Jesus tells us we will recognise the false prophets according to their fruits etc.). Therefore, Jesus certainly did not speak of rejecting criticism and assessment.

THE PLACE OF ASSESSEMENT IN THE INTIMACY WITH GOD

In this world corrupted by sin there is nothing and no one who can be relied upon without a thorough test (2 Corinthians 11:14-15). However, out of His grace and love God has revealed himself and made the way leading to Him possible for mankind and He has exposed wickedness and sin (John 15:22-24).

**So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."
(John 8:31-32)**

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

It is possible to live with God only if one accepts this offer of grace and lives 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. Where this is not practised, the path leading to eternal life might well be missed.

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4:23-24)

Watch yourselves that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward. Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. (2 John 8-9)

For instance, the one who cooks mushrooms shall not say that each of the mushrooms must be tested whether they are edible or not. Then, in the same way, how it would be possible to behave light-mindedly taking just the matters relating to God unimportant? Two people who make opposite and contradictory statements about the same issue cannot both be telling the truth, can they? Both people cannot be right when one says that God creates some people for condemnation and the other says he does not. One man says that the Holy Spirit is a person and one says he is not. One person claims that one can fall away from God and another that this is impossible. One says man is a sinner due to his nature and another says that he is not. One person holds that hell exists and another denies its existence. Several more examples could be listed from the doctrines of the different "Christian" groups. These are not merely abstract theological discussions but they essentially influence the practical life of their adherents. Do these contradictions not demand decisions from all who search earnestly for the truth and who ask themselves what God is like, how one can live a life pleasing to Him and what love and pure faith in Him are like. As an answer, we find many exhortations in the Bible to test and assess everything and everyone.

...for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them... (Ephesians 5:8-11)

Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil. (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22)

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

THE PLACE OF ASSESSEMENT IN THE LIFE OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Assessment is an indispensable manifestation of love. In order to give a person the necessary help in God's eyes we have to form an idea about this person's relationship with God – including its deficiencies – by considering their life and deeds. However, most people are too proud and therefore they take criticism very personally. It is certainly easier for everyone if, in order to avoid a probable conflict, one avoids confronting another person with his errors and calling him to repentance. Taking this 'easier' way however, led the Christian communities of the first century to several drastic and disastrous changes:

- The personal lives of the Christians became closed toward their brothers and sisters. The frank way of relating to one another and the brotherly love became unnatural. From here on no one could be sure about the spiritual state of his or her brother in God's sight.
- Parallel to the perceivable decrease in the practice of admonition and church discipline, the 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 the necessary help, admonition and encouragement and that of the readiness to exclude hardened sinners provided rich soil for hidden sins. Thus living a pseudo-christian life was made possible within the church, that is: the congregations were mixed with false Christians and unbelievers.
- Persons who were swift to action and had good organisational abilities – who basically gave a good impression – gained authority and a "leading position" in the congregations without anyone supervising or having the possibility to supervise their decisions and actions at a deeper level.
- As a consequence of these things, Christianity was opened up to welcome false teachings and false concepts of God. The church ceased to be an example that judges the world and calls it to life.

Foreseeing these dangers, the Bible motivates us to take responsibility for our brothers, to encourage and admonish them. In this way it was possible to maintain love, discipline and purity in the congregations according to God's will.

Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Hebrews 3:12-1-3)

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)

But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler -- not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves. (1 Corinthians 5:11-13)

Besides the urgent call to encourage our brothers we find many examples of how the Christians guarded over the teaching of the church, which is the "pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15):

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who 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 deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false... (Revelations 2:2)

From the next passage, it can be seen well that assessment played an indispensable role in the biblical Christian communities in getting to know others and helping them to repent:

But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you. (1 Corinthians 14:24-25)

Several times Jesus also obviously pointed at the things that kept the people away from Him (e.g. Matthew 23:37-54 and 19:16-22). If we also want others to get close to Him, we must follow Jesus' example even if it sometimes brings conflicts and rejection (2 Timothy 4:14-15).

From all these examples, it can be seen that assessment in itself is not a negative term at all. Furthermore, it is an important foundation of Christian love for the brothers, the truth and all men.