Is the Aspersion Correct; Namely, that the Christian Faith is Judgemental?”


I: -- “There they go again. Always finding fault; always carping, criticizing, nit-picking. Who do they think they are, anyway? Why do they think they’re a cut above everyone else, not to say flawless paragons of perfection?”

Who are these people? Who are these folk who think themselves more virtuous than most, as eager to find fault as a neurotic housekeeper is to find a piece of lint on a neighbour’s carpet? Who are these people who build themselves up only by tearing others down? They appear to have less compassion than a stone has water. They seem to have no understanding of life’s complexities, of how many shades of grey there really are, of how difficult it is to sort all of this out.

Make no mistake. These people do exist. Jesus spoke of them himself. He cautioned his disciples against becoming like them. “My followers,” he insisted, “must never be found trying to remove a dust-speck from someone else’s eye when a pine tree is sticking out of theirs. What’s more,” continues Jesus, “it would be utterly foolish for you, my disciples, to be carping nit-pickers, because the measure you give will be the measure you get.” In other words, those who coldly, callously fault others are going to get the same treatment themselves. Everyone has heard quoted the KJV version of the chief text under discussion, “Judge not lest ye be judged.” Good. We mustn’t make judgements. The matter is settled.

But it isn’t settled. In the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, “Don’t judge lest you be judged yourselves,” he also says, “Beware of false prophets. They have the appearance of harmless sheep when all the while they are fierce wolves eager to eat you alive.” Isn’t it obvious, now, that a judgement has to be made here? Doesn’t Jesus himself insist that we make a judgement of some sort? How else are we to distinguish between defenceless sheep and marauding wolf? – between authentic spokesperson for God and false prophet? How else survive?

Our Lord gets even tougher. Immediately after warning us disciples about dust-speck and pine tree and how we mustn’t be blind to our own depravity, Jesus adds, “Don’t give what is holy to the dogs; and don’t throw pearls before pigs – because pigs and dogs (he’s speaking here of humans) don’t appreciate the value of what you put in front of them. They will only turn on you and devour you.” Plainly Jesus is telling us that either we exercise judgement here or else we invite victimisation.

From the texts we’ve examined in the last three minutes it’s plain that Jesus insists on two matters: one, we must never be judgemental; two, we must always make sound judgements. In John’s gospel Jesus announce, “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgement.” (7:24 NRSV) Other translations are worth hearing. “Stop judging by external standards, and judge with true standards.” (TEV) “You mustn’t judge by the appearance of things but by the reality.” (JB Phillips) Plainly there’s a kind of judgement Jesus forbids us to make; and just as surely there’s a kind of judgement Jesus commands us to make.

Now I realize that you people may be somewhat weary of my frequent lessons in Greek, but only a Greek lesson can help us here. So here goes. When Jesus says “Don’t judge by appearances” the verb tense in John’s gospel refers to repeated, ceaseless action. “Don’t judge” plainly means “Don’t fall into the habit of carping all the time.” When Jesus uses the word “judge” the second time – “but judge with right judgement” – he uses a verb tense that refers to one, pointed, particular event concerning which we are to make a discernment and decisively draw the proper conclusion.

Here’s the event. People have been carping at Jesus for months. They don’t like this about him; they don’t like that. They find fault here and find fault there. One day Jesus heals a man who’s been paralysed for thirty-eight years. No problem. But Jesus has healed the man on the Sabbath. Big problem, because the Sabbath has been desecrated (they think.) After all, if a man has been paralysed for thirty-eight years, can’t his healing wait one more day? Whereupon our Lord’s detractors carp at him some more.
Jesus tells them they ought to be more discerning. They simply ought to possess better judgement. “Think about it;” says Jesus, “You carpers permit a man to be circumcised on the Sabbath. You believe – correctly – that it’s all right to circumcise on the Sabbath because circumcision is a sign that this man has been covenanted to embrace that life in God to which the Sabbath points, that life in faith which God wills for him, which life God pronounces blessed and one day will perfect. Circumcision (Jesus is still talking, since by now he’s steaming) means that his man is committed irrevocably (as surely as circumcision is irreversible) to a life in God that God has promised to enrich and crown. In healing this crippled man I am doing the very same thing,” says Jesus. “In healing this man I am moving him along to that ultimate restoration of body, mind and spirit that God guarantees for all who love him, a restoration which the Sabbath rest anticipates. Can’t you nit-pickers see this? Don’t you discern what I’m doing and why? Why aren’t you possessed of better judgement?” Jesus is not encouraging us to become judgemental. At the same time he commands us (note this: it’s a command) to acquire and exercise sound judgement.

II: -- Surely the need for sound judgement is obvious. Recently a physician spoke bitterly to me of those people who have spent years abusing their bodies only to land on the physician’s doorstep expecting to be made better immediately. Surely such people show appalling lack of judgement. If we maintain that proper diet and exercise are good, then we have judged that junk food and inertia are bad. We aren’t advertising ourselves as superior to those who inhale potato chips in front of the TV and whose only exercise is pressing the channel changer. Still, we have made a judgement concerning bodily health and how it’s maintained. Those who don’t make such a judgement aren’t congratulated for their tolerance or magnanimity or broadmindedness or humility; they are merely pitied for their folly.

All parents do their best to equip their youngsters with a critical mind concerning truth, goodness, godliness. The English word “critical” is derived from the Greek word KRITIKOS, “able to judge.” The authentically critical person isn’t the chronic fault-finder; it’s the person who is able to judge. We all raise our children to be critical in this sense. We all want them to be able to judge that glue-sniffing has consequences that won’t enhance them in any way. What’s more, we don’t want them to refrain from glue-sniffing just because their parents have laid a “heavy” on them and years later they are still cowering neurotically. We want them to understand truth, goodness, godliness; to understand their nature and destiny under God; to understand what reflects this and what contradicts it. And on the basis of this understanding we want them not to mimic their parents mindlessly but rather to make a correct evaluation and draw the right conclusion. Does their doing this mean they’re judgemental? On the contrary, their not doing this means they’re ruined.

When our daughter Catherine was ten or eleven years old she went to a party with school chums, several other girls her age. The mother of the girl hosting the party rented a video for the girls, “Rosemary’s Baby.” “Rosemary’s Baby” (I’m told) is a horror movie too horrible to describe. Catherine came home all but deranged. Maureen was up all night with her. I was ready to drive Catherine to the hospital and have her sedated with enough medicine to tranquilize a horse. Throughout it all I was so angry at the woman who showed the video that I couldn’t even talk about it. People who aren’t critical; that is, people who aren’t able to judge, are a threat to themselves and a danger to everyone else. Let’s not pretend anything else.

The same truth applies in the realm of the Spirit. Even if the Moonies and Hare Krishnas and the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Mormons are psychologically harmless (which I doubt) we still want our youngsters to be able to judge that these groups are spiritually ruinous if only because they set aside the gospel for what isn’t the “power of God unto salvation.” Surely we want our children to be able to judge between that truth – the gospel – which Jesus Christ engraves on the hearts of his people and the thousand-and-one distortions of it that warp humankind. We ought always to remember that not all the spirits are holy. We ought always to remember too that if our youngsters aren’t critical, aren’t able to judge in this domain, they can only be victimised by all such spirits.
This doesn’t mean we are encouraging them to think themselves superior in any way to those who disagree with them on religious matters. If they fancied themselves superior they’d be judgemental. And if they became chronic fault-finders they’d have shrivelled hearts. On the other hand if they lacked sound judgement they’d be suckers, suggestible, “taken in” by whatever’s blowing in the wind.

No one in this congregation knows my sister or her telephone number. She happens to live in Ontario. When the service is over I’d like you to dial her ten-digit Ontario number. (Since she lives in Ontario your chances of getting it right have improved immensely, since you can eliminate the area codes for all other provinces.) What chance do you have of getting my sister’s ten-digit telephone number right? Next to none, you say? Then let me tell you something: you have a much better chance mathematically of dialling her number than you have of winning the lottery. Since I don’t buy lottery tickets I’ve made a judgement here. Perhaps you have too. Does anyone think I’m narrow-minded or judgemental because I don’t sniff cocaine or ogle pornography?

III: -- Before I conclude the sermon I should like to discuss the meaning of the word “judgement” as the word is used by our Lord himself, used by the prophets before him, and used by those men and women (Deborah) who were judges in Israel earlier still and after whom one whole book of the Hebrew bible is named.

In ancient Israel judges weren’t like the men and women who preside in our courtrooms. They weren’t figures who said to one party, “You’re right” and to another party “You’re wrong.” Judges in ancient Israel were also called elders. These men and women who were called both judges and elders were also called saviours. Ultimately, then, the judge is the saviour. When the people of Israel were threatened by raiders they cried to the Lord, we are told, and the Lord “raised up judges who saved them.” In our modern era we assume that the primary function of a judge is to make unbiased pronouncements. Lurking deeper still in people’s minds, almost at an unconscious level, is the notion that the primary function of a judge is to condemn. But in ancient Israel the primary function of a judge was to save. Judges were elders were saviours.

In other words the judge, in those long ago days, was a leader in times of conflict and a ruler in times of peace. When the people were threatened, the judge mobilized them and encouraged them. When the people were cocksure and spiritually indifferent, the judge sobered them. When the people were about to meander, the judge guided them. And when the people, unguarded in their naiveness, found the “New Age” pantheism of their Canaanite neighbours attractive, as well as Canaanite promiscuity, not to mention a “tolerance” that accommodated everything and accommodated most eagerly precisely what was most lethal; in such a time the judge recalled the people to the truth and reality of God, as well as to the claim and command of God, and above all, to the promises of God.

Jesus often spoke of himself as judge. Make no mistake: he is our judge. As such Jesus Christ will not be trifled with or taken for granted or traded on. You and I know better than to be presumptuous concerning him. At the same time, because we’ve been to school in Israel we know that the judge who was given to humankind when it cried out to God; the judge who was given to humankind when it was threatened with condemnation on account of its sin; this judge is our elder brother and our saviour. He will be our judge precisely because he is first, already, our saviour. Since you and I face a coming judgement yet can only be judged by our saviour, we are unafraid. We know that Christ our judge is for us. We know that his judgement upon us will be that final corrective we have long needed and craved and are at last going to receive. In a word, our saviour’s judgement is our blessing.

It’s in the light of all this that we must understand how and why we are commanded to judge: “Judge with right judgement.” We have been appointed to judge ourselves, judge our society, judge the church, judge our leaders, judge the world. We are to judge as we have been judged. We’ve been judged — and are also yet to be judged — by Jesus Christ. He recognises threats to us everywhere in life even before we do; he equips us to discern them ourselves; he moves us to acknowledge his rule of righteousness.
Then so far from refusing to judge we must learn to judge. We must learn to be discerning, critical, discriminating. We must learn to draw the right conclusion and then to act on it. And of course we are to learn to do all of this not in order to preen ourselves as superior in any respect; we are to learn to do this in order to magnify God’s salvage operation throughout the creation. We are to learn to do this in order to magnify the blessing that God has bestowed upon us, upon our congregation, upon our community, upon the world.

In all of this we must avoid warping ourselves into something grotesque; namely, the sourpuss who nitpicks, is blind to her own faults, is happiest when he’s demolishing someone else – all the while buttressing such hideousness with a phoney piety as repulsive as it is remote from the spirit of Jesus. At the same time, in all of this we shall continue to recognize that people do complicate their lives whether through carelessness or folly or outright perversity, only to find that life, once complicated, is exceedingly difficult to render uncomplicated. And of course our hearts must never petrify into icy, stony insensitivity. If we sin here, says Jesus, then the measure we give will be the measure we get. Or to put it more popularly, “What goes around comes around.”

At the same time we must learn to make sound judgements, knowing what is to be feared and what fostered, what to be avoided and what welcomed, what is to be shunned and what embraced.

As our immersion in the gospel equips us with sound judgement we shall reflect the judges of Israel, particularly the judge of Israel, Christ Jesus our Lord. For his judgement, like theirs, always furthers his salvage operation, always aims at correction, always issues in blessing. It is through Christ’s judgement upon them that countless people have owned him as Saviour, now exalt him as Lord, and have been appointed to delight in him eternally.

Victor Shepherd    July 2018