

The Dreaded 'J' Word

We need to spend more time judging ourselves and less time criticizing our culture.

During the last year in this column and on my Web site, , I asked the question: "What's wrong with Christian television?" It generated fascinating responses, including letters from people who were upset that I would even bring the subject up. Most weren't happy with Christian TV, yet the idea that I was "judging" concerned them.

The view that we have no business judging other believers has become pervasive in the church today. The truth is, the Scripture from Matthew 7:1, "Do not judge" (NIV), has been widely misunderstood. Did Jesus really mean that we should never judge others?

It's interesting that when you examine Scripture, it's not just the act of judging that Jesus is talking about; it's also our attitude while doing it. Common sense tells us that making judgments is an important part of life. Whom our children play with, what church we attend, where we work and whom we associate with all are judgments.

However, today the culture tries to convince us that tolerance is the highest virtue. "Who are you to judge?" is the rallying cry of deviant behavior, heretical teaching and immoral living. Without proper criticism and judgment, living in real community would become impossible.

The question becomes, How do we judge like Jesus, and how can we be sure that love, repentance and restoration are the standards we use?

First, start with Scripture. Following the Bible is the key. Paul's writings to Timothy and also the church in Corinth are virtual manuals about proper judgment and correction.

Second, lose the beam. In Matthew 7:3-5, Jesus spoke of a hypocritical religious system that said one thing and did another. The Pharisee focused on the speck of dust in his neighbor's eye and ignored the beam of wood in his own eye, Jesus said. Pharisees couldn't see clearly because of their own sin, yet they felt perfectly free to judge others.

Third, judge results not people. We need to focus on judging our results, whether it's our teaching, people skills, preaching, media, business or whatever. To improve, we need the ability to evaluate the quality and worth of our work. When God spoke to Solomon to build the temple, Solomon didn't hire good-hearted losers; he hired the best craftsmen and artists in the land.

The truth is, the church today has it backward. We spend too much time criticizing the outside culture, and not enough time examining the church.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 5:13: "God will judge those outside. Expel the wicked man from among you." Churches and ministries raise millions to boycott and protest network television, secular movies and mainstream culture, and all the while we often drop the ball when it comes to keeping our own house clean.

If we can't have a conversation within the church about religious movies that fail, books that miss the mark, ministries that are ineffective or pastors who fall short,

then our future will be a long slide into oblivion. But if we can humble ourselves, pray that God gives us discernment, and always keep the goal of correction and restoration in mind, then we should feel free to seek the truth in all things.

It never hurts to keep in mind that our ability to judge is always limited and one day we'll all stand on level ground before the ultimate Judge. But until that time, I hope we can stop being afraid and continue calling one another to task for our many failures and shortcomings, so we can, as Paul said in Philippians 3:14: "Press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called [us] heavenward in Christ Jesus."

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