

# *Judge Not and Judging*

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As a student of the scriptures and as a former judge, I have had a special interest in the many scriptures that refer to judging. The best known of these is “Judge not, that ye be not judged” (3 Nephi 14:1, Matthew 7:1).

I have been puzzled that some scriptures command us not to judge and others instruct us that we should judge and even tell us how to do it. I am convinced that these seemingly contradictory directions are consistent when we view them with the perspective of eternity. The key is to understand that there are two kinds of judging: final judgments, which we are forbidden to make; and intermediate judgments, which we are directed to make, but upon righteous principles. Today I will speak about gospel judging.

## **Final Judgments**

I will speak first of the final judgment. This is that future occasion in which all of us will stand before the judgment seat of Christ to be judged according to our works (see 1 Nephi 15:33, 3 Nephi 27:15, Mormon 3:20, D&C 19:3). Some Christians look on this as the time when individuals are assigned to heaven or hell. With the increased understanding we have received from the Restoration, Latter-day Saints understand the final judgment as the

time when all mankind will receive their personal dominions in the mansions prepared for them in the various kingdoms of glory (see D&C 76:111, John 14:2, 1 Corinthians 15:40–44). I believe that the scriptural command to “judge not” refers most clearly to this final judgment, as in the Book of Mormon declaration that “man shall not . . . judge; for judgment is mine, saith the Lord” (Mormon 8:20).

Since mortals cannot suppose that they will be acting as final judges at that future, sacred time, why did the Savior command that we not judge final judgments? I believe this commandment was given because we presume to make final judgments whenever we proclaim that any particular person is going to hell (or to heaven) for a particular act or as of a particular time. When we do this—and there is great temptation to do so—we hurt ourselves and the person we pretend to judge.

The effect of one mortal’s attempting to pass final judgment on another mortal is analogous to the effect on athletes and observers if we could proclaim the outcome of an athletic

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contest with certainty while it was still underway. Similar reasoning forbids our presuming to make final judgments on the outcome of any person's lifelong mortal contest.

President Brigham Young taught:

*I am very thankful that it is not our province . . . to judge the world; if it were, we would ruin everything. We have not sufficient wisdom, our minds are not filled with the knowledge and power of God. . . . And we must also acquire the discretion that God exercises in being able to look into futurity, and to ascertain and know the results of our acts away in the future, even in eternity, before we will be capable of judging. [JD 19:7–8]*

In this teaching Brigham Young was, typically, merely elaborating on a teaching of the Prophet Joseph Smith, who said:

*While one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy, the Great Parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard. . . . He holds the reins of judgment in His hands; He is a wise Lawgiver, and will judge all men, not according to the narrow, contracted notions of men . . . , "not according to what they have not, but according to what they have," those who have lived without law, will be judged without law, and those who have a law, will be judged by that law. [Teachings, p. 218]*

Thus, we must refrain from making final judgments on people, because we lack the knowledge and the wisdom to do so. We would even apply the wrong standards. The world's way is to judge competitively between winners and losers. The Lord's way of final judgment will be to apply his perfect knowledge of the law a person has received and to judge on the basis of that person's circumstances, motives, and actions throughout his or her entire life (see Luke 12:47–48, John 15:22, 2 Nephi 9:25). As was wisely taught in a BYU

devotional, "The Lord does not grade on a curve." He will judge us in terms of "qualities," not "quotas" (in Janet G. Lee, "The Lord Doesn't Grade on a Curve," *BYU 1994–95 Devotional and Fireside Speeches* [Provo: Brigham Young University, 1995], pp. 91, 93).

Even the Savior, during his mortal ministry, refrained from making final judgments. We see this in the account of the woman taken in adultery. After the crowd who intended to stone her had departed, Jesus asked her about her accusers: "Hath no man condemned thee?" (John 8:10). When she answered no, Jesus declared, "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (v. 11). In this context the word *condemn* apparently refers to the final judgment (see John 3:17).

The Lord obviously did not justify the woman's sin. He simply told her that he did not condemn her—that is, he would not pass final judgment on her at that time. This interpretation is confirmed by what he then said to the Pharisees: "Ye judge after the flesh; I judge no man" (John 8:15). The woman taken in adultery was granted time to repent, time that would have been denied by those who wanted to stone her. The Savior gave this same teaching on another occasion, when he said to the Pharisees, "And if any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world" (John 12:47).

From all of this we see that final judgment is the Lord's and that mortals must refrain from judging any human being in the final sense of concluding or proclaiming that they are irretrievably bound for hell or have lost all hope of exaltation.

### **Intermediate Judgments**

In contrast to forbidding mortals to make final judgments, the scriptures require mortals to make what I will call "intermediate judgments." These judgments are essential to the exercise of personal moral agency. Our

scriptural accounts of the Savior's mortal life provide the pattern. He declared, "I have many things to say and to judge of you" (John 8:26) and "For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see" (John 9:39).

During his mortal ministry the Savior made and acted upon many intermediate judgments, such as when he told the Samaritan woman of her sinful life (see John 4:17–19); when he rebuked the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy (see Matthew 15:1–9, 23:1–33); and when he commented on the comparative merit of the rich men's offerings and the widow's mites (see Mark 12:41–44).

Church leaders are specifically commanded to judge. Thus, the Lord said to Alma:

*Whosoever transgresseth against me, him shall ye judge according to the sins which he has committed; and if he confess his sins before thee and me, and repenteth in the sincerity of his heart, him shall ye forgive, and I will forgive him also. . . .*

*. . . And whosoever will not repent of his sins the same shall not be numbered among my people.*  
[Mosiah 26:29, 32]

Similarly, in modern revelation the Lord appointed the bishop to be a "judge in Israel" to judge over property and transgressions (D&C 58:17, 107:72).

The Savior also commanded individuals to be judges, both of circumstances and of other people. Through the prophet Moses the Lord commanded Israel, "Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour" (Leviticus 19:15).

On one occasion the Savior chided the people, "Judge ye not what is right?" (Luke 12:57). On another occasion he said, "Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment" (John 7:24).

We must, of course, make judgments every day in the exercise of our moral agency, but we

must be careful that our judgments of people are intermediate and not final. Thus, our Savior's teachings contain many commandments we cannot keep without making intermediate judgments of people: "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine" (Matthew 7:6); "Beware of false prophets. . . . Ye shall know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:15–16); and "Go ye out from among the wicked" (D&C 38:42).

We all make judgments in choosing our friends, in choosing how we will spend our time and our money, and, of course, in choosing an eternal companion. Some of these intermediate judgments are surely among those the Savior referred to when he taught that "the weightier matters of the law" include judgment (Matthew 23:23).

The scriptures not only command or contemplate that we will make intermediate judgments, but they also give us some guidance—some governing principles—in how to do so.

### **Righteous Intermediate Judgment**

The most fundamental principle is contained in the Savior's commandment that we "judge not unrighteously . . . : but judge righteous judgment" (JST, Matthew 7:1–2; see also John 7:24, Alma 41:14). Let us consider some principles or ingredients that lead to a "righteous judgment."

First of all, a righteous judgment must, by definition, be intermediate. It will refrain from declaring that a person has been assured of exaltation or from dismissing a person as being irrevocably bound for hellfire. It will refrain from declaring that a person has forfeited all opportunity for exaltation or even all opportunity for a useful role in the work of the Lord. The gospel is a gospel of hope, and none of us is authorized to deny the power of the Atonement to bring about a cleansing of individual sins, forgiveness, and a reformation of life on appropriate conditions.

Second, a righteous judgment will be guided by the Spirit of the Lord, not by anger, revenge, jealousy, or self-interest. The Book of Mormon teaches:

*For behold, my brethren, it is given unto you to judge, that ye may know good from evil; and the way to judge is as plain . . . as the daylight is from the dark night.*

*For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil. [Moroni 7:15–16]*

The Savior taught that one of the missions of the Comforter he would send would be to assist in judgment of the world by guiding the faithful “into all truth” (John 16:13; see also vv. 8, 11).

Third, to be righteous, an intermediate judgment must be within our stewardship. We should not presume to exercise and act upon judgments that are outside our personal responsibilities. Some time ago I attended an adult Sunday School class in a small town in Utah. The subject was the sacrament, and the class was being taught by the bishop. During class discussion a member asked, “What if you see an unworthy person partaking of the sacrament? What do you do?”

The bishop answered, “You do nothing. I may need to do something.” That wise answer illustrates my point about stewardship in judging.

A fourth principle of a righteous intermediate judgment of a person is that we should, if possible, refrain from judging until we have adequate knowledge of the facts. In an essay titled “Sitting in the Seat of Judgment,” the great essayist William George Jordan reminded us that character

*cannot be judged as dress-goods—by a yard or so of sample unrolled from a bolt on the counter. . . . One judges a painting by the full view of the whole canvas; separate isolated square inches of colour are*

*meaningless. Yet we dare to judge our fellow man by single acts and words, misleading glimpses, and deceptive moments of special strain. From these we magnify a mood into a character and an episode into a life. . . .*

*We have a right to our preferences, our likes and dislikes, our impressions, our opinions, but we should withhold final judgment—as an honest unprejudiced jurymen keeps his verdict in suspense until he has heard and tested all of the evidence. . . .*

*. . . We misinterpret motives, do not know facts, and judge from wrong standards. [William George Jordan, “Sitting in the Seat of Judgment,” *The Crown of Individuality* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1909), pp. 101–5]*

In another essay, William George Jordan wrote:

*There is but one quality necessary for the perfect understanding of character, one quality that, if [a] man have it, he may dare to judge—that is, omniscience. Most people study character as a proof-reader pores over a great poem: his ears are dulled to the majesty and music of the lines, his eyes are darkened to the magic imagination of the genius of the author; that proofreader is busy watching for an inverted comma, a misspacing, or a wrong font letter. He has an eye trained for the imperfections, the weaknesses. . . .*

*We do not need to judge nearly so much as we think we do. This is the age of snap judgments. . . . [We need] the courage to say, “I don’t know. I am waiting further evidence. I must hear both sides of the question.” It is this suspended judgment that is the supreme form of charity. [“The Supreme Charity of the World,” *The Kingship of Self-Control* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Revell, n.d.), pp. 27–30; emphasis in original]*

Someone has said that you cannot slice cheese so fine that it doesn’t have two sides.

Two experiences illustrate the importance of caution in judging. A Relief Society worker visiting a sister in her ward asked whether the

woman's married children ever visited her. Because of a short-term memory loss, this elderly sister innocently answered no. So informed, her visitor and others spoke criticisms of her children for neglecting their mother. In fact, one of her children visited her at least daily, and all of them helped her in many ways. They were innocent of neglect and should not have been judged on the basis of an inadequate knowledge of the facts.

Another such circumstance was described in an *Ensign* article by BYU professor Arthur R. Bassett:

*I was troubled when one person whispered to another all through the opening prayer. The guilty parties were not hard to spot because they continued whispering all through the class. I kept glaring at them, hoping that they would take the hint, but they didn't seem to notice. Several times during the hour, I was tempted to ask them to take their conversation outside if they felt it was so urgent—but fortunately something kept me from giving vent to my feelings.*

*After the class, one of them came to me and apologized that she hadn't explained to me before class that her friend was deaf. The friend could read lips, but since I was discussing—as I often do—with my back to the class, writing at the chalkboard and talking over my shoulder, my student had been “translating” for her friend, telling her what I was saying. To this day I am thankful that both of us were spared the embarrassment that might have occurred had I given vent to a judgment made without knowing the facts. [Arthur R. Bassett, “Floods, Winds, and the Gates of Hell,” *Ensign*, June 1991, p. 8]*

The scriptures give a specific caution against judging where we cannot know all the facts. King Benjamin taught:

*Perhaps thou shalt say: The man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand, and will not give unto him of my food, nor*

*impart unto him of my substance that he may not suffer, for his punishments are just—*

*But I say unto you, O man, whosoever doeth this the same hath great cause to repent; and except he repenteth of that which he hath done he perisheth forever, and hath no interest in the kingdom of God. . . .*

*And if ye judge the man who putteth up his petition to you for your substance that he perish not, and condemn him, how much more just will be your condemnation for withholding your substance. [Mosiah 4:17–18, 22]*

There is one qualification to this principle that we should not judge people without an adequate knowledge of the facts. Sometimes urgent circumstances require us to make preliminary judgments before we can get all of the facts we desire for our decision making.

From time to time some diligent defenders deny this reality, such as the writer of a letter to the editor who insisted that certain publicly reported conduct should be ignored because “in this country you are innocent until you are proven guilty.” The presumption of innocence until proven guilty in a court of law is a vital rule to guide the conduct of a criminal trial, but it is not a valid restraint on personal decisions. There are important restraints upon our intermediate judgments, but the presumption of innocence is not one of them.

Some personal decisions must be made before we have access to all of the facts. Two hypotheticals illustrate this principle:

1. If a particular person has been arrested for child sexual abuse and is free on bail awaiting trial on his guilt or innocence, will you trust him to tend your children while you take a weekend trip?

2. If a person you have trusted with your property has been indicted for embezzlement, would you continue to leave him in charge of your life savings?

In such circumstances we do the best we can, relying ultimately on the teaching in

modern scripture that we should put our “trust in that Spirit which leadeth to do good—yea, to do justly, to walk humbly, to judge righteously” (D&C 11:12).

A fifth principle of a righteous intermediate judgment is that whenever possible we will refrain from judging people and only judge situations. This is essential whenever we attempt to act upon different standards than those of others with whom we must associate—at home, at work, or in the community. We can set and act upon high standards for ourselves or our homes without condemning those who do otherwise. For example, I know of an LDS family with an older teenage son who has become addicted to smoking. The parents have insisted that he not smoke in their home or in front of his younger siblings. That is a wise judgment of a situation, not a person. Then, even as the parents take protective measures pertaining to a regrettable situation, they need to maintain loving relations and encourage improved conduct by the precious person.

A recent *Ensign* article by an anonymous victim of childhood sexual abuse illustrates the contrast between judging situations and judging persons. The article begins with heart-wrenching words and with true statements of eternal principles.

*I am a survivor of childhood physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. I no longer view myself as a victim. The change has come from inside me—my attitude. I do not need to destroy myself with anger and hate. I don't need to entertain thoughts of revenge. My Savior knows what happened. He knows the truth. He can make the judgments and the punishments. He will be just. I will leave it in his hands. I will not be judged for what happened to me, but I will be judged by how I let it affect my life. I am responsible for my actions and what I do with my knowledge. I am not to blame for what happened to me as a child. I cannot change the past. But I can change the future. I have chosen to heal myself and pass on to my children what I have learned. The*

*ripples in my pond will spread through future generations. [“The Journey to Healing,” *Ensign*, September 1997, p. 19]*

This wise author also treats the importance of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a companion principle to the commandment that in final judgments we judge not and in intermediate judgments we judge righteously. The Savior taught, “Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven” (Luke 6:37). In modern revelation the Lord has declared, “I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men” (D&C 64:10).

Pursuing that principle, the author of the *Ensign* article writes:

*Somewhere along the journey of healing comes the essential task of forgiving. Often the command to forgive (see D&C 64:10) seems almost more than one can bear, but this eternal principle can bring lasting peace. . . .*

*“ . . . I love that truth that although I need to evaluate situations . . . , I do not need to condemn or judge my abusers nor be part of the punishment. I leave all that to the Lord. I used the principle of forgiveness to strengthen me.” [“Journey to Healing,” p. 22]*

A final ingredient or principle of a righteous judgment is that it will apply righteous standards. If we apply unrighteous standards, our judgment will be unrighteous. By falling short of righteous standards, we place ourselves in jeopardy of being judged by incorrect or unrighteous standards ourselves. The fundamental scripture on the whole subject of not judging contains this warning: “For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again” (Matthew 7:2; see also 3 Nephi 14:2).

The prophet Mormon taught:

*And now, my brethren, seeing that ye know the light by which ye may judge, which light is the light of Christ, see that ye do not judge wrongfully; for with that same judgment which ye judge ye shall also be judged. [Moroni 7:18]*

A standard can be unrighteous because it is too harsh—the consequences are too severe for the gravity of the wrong and the needs of the wrongdoer. Here I remember a conversation with an LDS newspaperwoman who described what happened when she reported that the Prophet Joseph Smith received the golden plates in 1826—a mistake of one year from the actual date of 1827. She said she received about 10 phone calls from outraged Latter-day Saints who would not accept her admission of error and sincere apology and berated her with abusive language. I wonder if persons who cannot handle an honest mistake without abusing the actor can stand up to having their own mistakes judged by so severe a standard.

As I have observed the judgments of presidents of the Church in matters of Church discipline, I have marveled at the care they have exercised to assure that justice is balanced with mercy, with loving concern for the consequences to innocent family members—born and unborn—as well as to the transgressors themselves.

In a BYU devotional address, Professor Catherine Corman Parry gave a memorable scriptural illustration of the consequences of judging by the wrong standards. The scripture is familiar. Martha received Jesus into her house and worked to provide for him while her sister Mary sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word.

*But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me.*

*And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things:*

*But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her. [Luke 10:40–42]*

Professor Parry comments:

*Those of us with more of Martha than of Mary in us . . . do not doubt the overriding importance of listening to the Lord, [but] does the listening have to be done during dinner preparations? Would it have hurt Mary to have joined us in serving, then we all could have sat down to hear the Lord together? And furthermore, what about the value of our work in the world? If it weren't for us Marthas cleaning whatever we see and fussing over meals, there would be a lot of dirty, hungry people in this world. We may not live by bread alone, but I've never known anyone to live without it. Why, oh, why couldn't the Lord have said, "You're absolutely right, Martha. What are we thinking of to let you do all this work alone? We'll all help, and by the way, that centerpiece looks lovely"?*

*What he did say is difficult to bear, but perhaps somewhat less difficult if we examine its context. . . . The Lord acknowledges Martha's care: "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things" (v. 41). Then he delivers the gentle but clear rebuke. But the rebuke would not have come had Martha not prompted it. The Lord did not go into the kitchen and tell Martha to stop cooking and come listen. Apparently he was content to let her serve him however she cared to, until she judged another person's service: "Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me" (v. 40). Martha's self-importance, expressed through her judgment of her sister, occasioned the Lord's rebuke, not her busy-ness with the meal. [Catherine Corman Parry, "Simon, I Have Somewhat to Say unto Thee': Judgment and Condemnation in the Parables of Jesus," Brigham Young University 1990–91]*

*Devotional and Fireside Speeches* [Provo: BYU, 1991], p. 116]

In subsequent portions of her talk, Professor Parry observed that in this instance—and also in the example of Simon the Pharisee, who criticized the woman who anointed the feet of the Savior (see Luke 7:36–50)—the Savior took one individual’s judgment of another individual as a standard and applied that judgment back upon the individual who was judging. Professor Parry observed:

*Quite literally, they were measured by their own standards and found wanting. . . .*

*. . . While there are many things we must make judgments about, the sins of another or the state of our own souls in comparison to others seems not to be among them. . . .*

*. . . Our own sins, no matter how few or seemingly insignificant, disqualify us as judges of other people’s sins. [“Simon, I Have Somewhat to Say unto Thee,” pp. 118–19]*

I love the words in Susan Evans McCloud’s familiar hymn:

*Who am I to judge another  
When I walk imperfectly?  
In the quiet heart is hidden  
Sorrow that the eye can’t see.  
Who am I to judge another?  
Lord, I would follow thee.*

[“Lord, I Would Follow Thee,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 220]

In one of the monthly General Authority fast and testimony meetings, I heard President James E. Faust say, “The older I get, the less judgmental I become.” That wise observation gives us a standard to live by in the matter of judgments. We should refrain from anything that seems to be a final judgment of any person—manifesting our determination to leave

final judgments to the Lord, who alone has the capacity to judge.

In the intermediate judgments we must make, we should take care to judge righteously. We should seek the guidance of the Spirit in our decisions. We should limit our judgments to our own stewardships. Whenever possible we should refrain from judging people until we have an adequate knowledge of the facts. So far as possible, we should judge circumstances rather than people. In all our judgments we should apply righteous standards. And, in all of this, we must remember the command to forgive.

There is a doctrine underlying the subject of gospel judging. It was taught when a lawyer asked the Savior, “Which is the great commandment in the law?” (Matthew 22:36). Jesus answered:

*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,  
and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.*

*This is the first and great commandment.*

*And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love  
thy neighbour as thyself.*

*On these two commandments hang all the law  
and the prophets. [vv. 37–40]*

Later, in the sublime teachings the Savior gave his apostles on the eve of his suffering and the Atonement, he said:

*A new commandment I give unto you, That ye  
love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also  
love one another.*

*By this shall all men know that ye are my disci-  
ples, if ye have love one to another. [John 13:34–35]*

May God bless us that we may have that love and that we may show it in refraining from making final judgments of our fellow-man. And in those intermediate judgments we are responsible to make, may we judge righteously and with love. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of love. Our Master, whom

we seek to serve, is, as the scriptures say, a “God of love” (2 Corinthians 13:11). May we have his love. May we grow in faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, of whom I testify, as our

Redeemer, our Creator, and our Savior. And may we grow in the capacity to live his gospel, I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.