

# The Judgement of Judging

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Text: St. Mark 11:27-33

I am fascinated by the frequent encounters between our Lord and the chief priests, lawyers and elders who confronted Him demanding, "Tell us clearly who you are! Make it plain to us! Give us a sign! Tell us by what authority you do the things you do!" Time and time again they engaged Him, and as often as they asked, He answered. But His answers, at least to them, and perhaps to us, were not satisfactory. They seemed evasive. "Give us a sign!" they asked, and He replied that it is an evil generation that seeks a sign. No sign would be given. "Tell us who you are!" they demanded, and He replied that He had told them. "By what authority do you act?" they wanted to know. And he answered them with a question of His own about the authority of John the Baptist.

What is going on? Is Jesus just being difficult? Is He obstinate and perverse in refusing to give them a clear answer? Why does He not come right out and tell them what they want to know?

Our Lord was not being evasive, or perverse, or obstinate. His difficulty was that the answer to all their questions was in front of the eyes of anyone who had eyes to see. For example, they asked for a sign. But what sign could He give them? They already had the best and clearest sign. The truth is that He was Himself the sign, and if they could not find what they were looking for in Him they wouldn't see it in any other sign He might give them. "Show us clearly! Tell us plainly!" they demanded. He answered that He had shown them already and had told them plainly and they still couldn't or wouldn't see or hear. What was there left for Him to do? Was He simply to keep on repeating Himself, saying the same thing over and over again? But what help would that be? It was all there for them, but they had eyes and wouldn't see, and ears but wouldn't hear. Do you get a sense of our Lord's helplessness? What more could He do or say?

Others have experienced that sense of frustration. Someone once asked Robert Frost, "Mr. Frost, what does that poem mean?" He replied, "What is it that you want me to do, say it again only worse?" Someone asked Pavlova, "What does that dance mean?" and she replied, "If I could have told you, I wouldn't have danced it!"

Now with Robert Frost it is, I suppose, intelligence that is called for to understand his poem, and we are not all brilliant. I find some of his poems difficult. I am not sure I understand them. With Pavlova, I suppose what was required to understand her work was a refined aesthetic sense, some appreciation of the art of the ballet. And some of us don't have a great deal of that. But not with our Lord! It wasn't brilliance that was needed to understand who He was and what He did. Their failure was not one of intellect but of attitude. Their attitude was wrong.

The common people knew where His authority came from. We read that "they were astonished at His teaching, for unlike their own teachers, He taught with a note of authority." They could see. They understood. They rightly interpreted the sign. They knew that His authority was something He carried with Him, in His own Person, and that it rested in the power of His truth to enlighten and persuade.

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Not so with those who came demanding that He display His credentials! They couldn't or wouldn't see because their attitude was wrong. They didn't understand that their failure to see had more to do with their lack of perceptiveness than with His powers of demonstration.

Indeed, it would seem to me as I study the record, that there was one particular element in their attitude which by its very nature proved an almost impenetrable barrier to His appeal and rendered them incapable of seeing and hearing. It was that they saw themselves as His judges. They made Him somehow accountable to them. When they assumed that He was there to be judged and that they would do the judging; when they came at Him with an imperious demand, "Show us! Tell us! Prove your credentials!"; then the very conceit of their assumptions made it hard for them to see and hard for Him to show them.

What did our Lord do about it? He backed them off, that's what He did. He said, "You have been questioning me, now I am going to question you." Those who thought themselves His judges suddenly found themselves judged; those who had been asking questions were now questioned; and all this in the faint hope that they might begin to see that things were not the way they thought they were and that their attitude distorted their vision. I wonder if this was in our Lord's mind when on another occasion He said, "Judge not that you be not judged." Suddenly they found that their judgment was under judgment; that their stance, seemingly so dominant and confident, was precarious and false.

Of course the falseness of their attitude makes us question the appropriateness and integrity of our own. Have we eyes to see and ears to hear? Are we as blind and deaf to Him as they were? And for the same reason? How can we test our perception and clear our vision?

## **I. First of all, let us understand that we are judged.**

Do you ever scrutinize your own spiritual experience to find those points at which you are vulnerable? When I do so I find that I am threatened and uneasy when I am in the right. Not when I am in the wrong; being in the wrong brings its own chastening and imposes its own reticence. There is no temptation to arrogance when we know we are in the wrong. But when we are in the right we must be careful, for it is spiritually hazardous.

I was in the right once, and my being in the right meant that the other man, my adversary, was in the wrong. I knew it and he knew it. I had him just where I wanted him, and I loved it. I loved the power and moral superiority of it. And I hated myself for loving it. Thank God for the inner voice that whispered to me in the first flush of conceit, "Nobody, but nobody, is that right!"

The other times I find morally and spiritually threatening are when I sit in judgment. It is heady stuff, this judging of others. The power of it! The temptation to arrogance that is in it! It is so easy to be carried away by the whole thing and adopt an attitude of moral superiority, assuming that everything that is to be judged is out there in front of us, and that all the judgment is our own. What is there to see, then,

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but the mote in our brother's eye? Except that Jesus reminds us of the beam, the plank, that is in our own, so that our vision is distorted and we cannot see clearly to judge truly. It is not only the splinter in our brother's eye that calls for judgment, but the plank in our own. Judgment is not merely of the things we see, but of the way we see. In all our judgments we must be aware that we are judged.

Von Schlegel wrote a play in which the curtain rises to show an audience waiting for the curtain to go up. When it goes up it shows an audience waiting for the curtain to go up. The same thing happens again, and by this time the original audience, the real one, is feeling restless and uneasy. Are they, too, being watched?

Gogol wrote a play in which he revealed the emptiness of our pretensions and the foolishness of our hypocrisy. He mocks both, and has the audience laughing at those who are guilty of them. But suddenly, in the midst of the play, one of the characters faces the audience and asks who it is they are laughing at. He goes on to answer his own question. They are laughing at themselves, for nothing is revealed on the stage that is not present in the hearts of the audience.

Kierkegaard reminds us that when we come to worship there are no spectators. We are not permitted to come merely to watch and judge, for in worship there is only one Spectator and one Judge. He goes on to make fun of the way we talk about God in our ordinary conversations as though He were absent. He reminds us that all our comments, all our opinions, all our judgments of the divine ordering of things are spoken in the divine Presence. Do you know what he is saying to us? That when we are judging, what is to be judged is not out there in front of us. We are in the picture; we had better look over our shoulder because in our judging we are judged.

## **II. Notice, not only that we are judged, but that we are judged by our judgments.**

Sometimes we are condemned by them. We are judged by them because they reveal us, give us away. They declare our insight, or lack of it; our intelligence, or lack of it; our sensitivity, or lack of it. Our values, our perceptiveness, our wisdom are all revealed when we judge. So we must be very careful, knowing that every opinion we express tells something about us.

Did you hear of the woman who was being shown through an art gallery and who moved from room to room and from picture to picture commenting, "I don't see much in that!" The attendant who accompanied the group listened to her until he could stand it no longer; quietly he told her, "Madam, the pictures are not on trial."

There is an amusing story told of Joseph Parker of London's City Temple, and a prince of preachers. One Sunday morning Parker told his huge congregation that before the service someone had written him an intimidating note and slipped it under his study door. It informed him that the writer would be present at worship and intended to make a critical assessment of the sermon, a philosophical analysis of every sentence the preacher uttered. Parker went on to say that at first reading the note filled him with dismay. Who could stand such scrutiny? He had taken the trouble

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to read it twice, however, and lost most of his trepidation when he noticed that the writer spelled "philosophical" with an "f."

Gilbert Frankau's mother used to put on cultural and social occasions nearly every Sunday evening. She would invite artists to come and sing and play for her guests. One evening she invited a young Australian soprano to come and sing. When it was over she wrote a comment about the singer in her diary. "What an appalling voice," she wrote, "the woman ought to be muzzled and never allowed to sing again." The young soprano was Nellie Melba.

Here is a literary critic writing in the *Edinburgh Review* and declaring adamantly, "The poem simply will not do!" The poem that "would not do" was William Wordsworth's "The Excursion."

"Judge not that you be not judged," says our Lord, because He knows that our judgments give us away. We think we are doing the judging, but the very words we speak are the words that judge us. This can be lightsome and humorous, as we have seen. It can also be tragic. Herod, Pilate, Caiaphas, all in the conceit and arrogance of power, judged Jesus. And Herod, Pilate and Caiaphas have been condemned by their judgment ever since.

Haven't you noticed that our judgment of other people's character reveals our own? We listen to those who are critical of the gifts and accomplishments of others, and say to ourselves, "Why are they so bitter, or jealous, or resentful?" Their criticism reveals more of themselves than of those whom they criticize. Their insecurity, their inferiority, their envy, shows in their criticism so that we want to tell them, "Don't say another word! Every word you speak gives you away!" We are judged, and our judgments judge us. Sometimes they condemn us.

### **III. Knowing that we are judged heightens our sense of responsibility.**

In this way it can do great things for our character, for it deepens our sense of being accountable. The turning point in *The Book of Job* comes when Job, who has made all his complaints against God, has asked all his questions, expressed all his impatience, given voice to all his dissatisfaction, is answered by God out of a whirlwind. And what is God's answer? It is to ask Job a question! Suddenly the questioner has not only asked a question, but must give an answer. And God's question of Job sets his complaint within the wonder of creation until he is made to realize, in the words of Thomas Traherne, "how lately he was made and how wonderful it was when he came into it." The details of God's answer to Job are outside the scope of this sermon, but the effect of God's question on Job is immediate and compelling. Job is silenced and humbled and then moved to adoration when he cannot begin to answer the God he has so vigorously questioned.

Victor Frankel tells us that the difference between those who survived the appalling conditions in the Nazi concentration camp in which he was confined, and those who did not, had little to do with their size or physical strength. The determining difference was that some thought they were asking the questions and others knew that they were being questioned. Some of them asked, "Why should this

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happen to me? What have I done to deserve this? Why has life done this to me?" Those who talked like that often sank into self-pity and lost the will to survive. But there were others who believed, not that they were to question life but that life was questioning them. Their awareness of being tested, and the sense of accountability it created, strengthened them to come through. The difference between life and death was whether they saw themselves as the questioners or the questioned. Those who survived were convinced that the most important thing in life is not what happens to us, but what we do with what happens to us.

I read once of a young girl, raised in rural America in times when there were seven grades in one school, of one room, with one teacher. One day she complained to her mother of her lack of opportunity. Her mother, of pioneering stock and spirit, replied, "Don't complain to me about that! I have given you life and being; I may not be able to give you much more, but I have given you that, and it is up to you to do what you with it." That "hard" word was a saving word. It stopped the girl from feeling sorry for herself, deepened her sense of personal responsibility and strengthened her will. She went on to make the most of her opportunity, limited as it was, and became a distinguished scholar in her own right and the wife of a university president. The change came about when she realized that life was not on trial; she was. She was not asking the questions; life was.

It can be like that with us in a matter as elevated as our sense of moral indignation. We rage, and rightly so, against the predicament of the homeless in our city, or of the hungry in our world, or the victims of war or revolution. Our hearts go out especially to little children. We ask why God allows so much suffering and why He appears to do so little to redress the injustices of our world. We echo old Thomas Carlyle's complaint, "God sits in heaven and does nothing!" Yet often our moral indignation is not matched by our Christian compassion. We'd rather ask God the question than acknowledge that we are part of the answer. We forget that God's loving intention for His world calls us to be the instruments of His good purpose. If we allow our moral indignation to ask God the question, we must not be surprised when God's answer is to ask us what we are doing about the injustices that kindle our indignation. We often have it within our power to right the very wrongs which make us question God's goodness! We are not only the askers of the question; we are required to answer.

### **IV. Finally, we are judged because our judgments have consequences.**

We sometimes judge others, express our criticism of them to them, and think it ends there. We imagine that the matter rests where we left it. We seldom stop to think that what we say has an effect. Our judgments, our verdicts, especially if they are harsh judgments of other people, do make a difference to the way they feel, the way they think, and ultimately to what they will do in response or reaction to our words. We judge them; but they will judge our judgments, and will decide how to deal with them and with us. So we must be careful, for our judgments do have consequences. Sometimes we call these consequences the wrath of God, or "fearful symmetry" as a Blake called them, or dramatic irony. It doesn't matter what we call

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the consequences, so long as we believe the reality of them. Sooner or later our judgments judge us. We are judged by their consequences.

This holds true, not only of what we say to other people or the way we treat them, but of what we do to ourselves. All the time, we are making judgments about our life, its goals and values, what we are after, what is of first importance to us. How shall we decide? Is it money, or power, or sex, or fame that we're after? We make our decision about that, but it doesn't end there. As surely as you are sitting in this church, that judgment will be judged, for it will have consequences, and they will be to our joy or sorrow, our fulfillment or emptiness, for we have no right to expect more than our chosen values can deliver. Does that sound difficult? Let me make it plain.

If you put self at the center, you must be prepared to find your outer limits there, and that can be very lonely. If what you are after is power, you had better forget about affection, for it is very difficult to have both. If you really think that life is a rat-race, you must not look for any dignity in it. If you have made up your mind that life is purely quantitative, then you had better keep your averages up. If you are a gossip, you mustn't expect confidences. If it is your practice to confront people, then don't expect them to come knocking on your door when what they need is tenderness. If what you are really after is security, you had better forget about ecstasy. If you think your children are among your own private possessions, then you must not look for creative and spontaneous spirits. If you really are a materialist, then don't consult us gurus about spiritual values for there is very little we have to say to you, and even less that you would understand. If you are possessed by your profession, you had better keep one eye on your relationships. If you are interested only in justice and not in mercy, you'd better not make any mistakes. If you are unscrupulously ambitious, you must not expect trustful friends. And if you decide to live by the sword, then by God you had better carry one. Do you know why? Because life is moral, that's why; because our judgments really do come back to us for good or ill; we really do, in the end, reap what we sow and not any more; and the chickens really do come home to roost.

"Show us clearly! Tell us plainly! Who are you? Give us a sign! By what authority?" we demand, in questions that are sometimes distorted by arrogance and blinded by conceit. And all the time it would be far more fitting if we were to utter a prayer born of our weakness and shaped by our infirmity: "Lord, that we might receive our sight!"