

Judgmentalism: A Bitter Fruit

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I wish I had as easy a time battling judgmentalism as I do battling lust. No, I'm not bragging about my great victory over lust (although I have made considerable progress in this area—which should reassure those of you who have been reading my advice in this area over the years). Rather, I am lamenting the very limited progress I have made in my battle to become less judgmental.

I bring this subject up here for two reasons. First, I have observed that judgmentalism very often accompanies same-sex attractions (SSA); it may even be more common among SSA strugglers than among Christians in general. Second, I believe that letting judgmentalism continue to have its way in our lives can get in the way of finding the healing that God wants for us.

Let's begin by looking at the concurrence of judgmentalism with homosexuality. Both, it seems, can come out of low self-esteem. Low self-esteem has been widely recognized as a root of homosexuality, especially among men. Feeling we did not measure up in the aggressive and competitive world of boys, many of us withdrew from their world—and from the arena in which our manhood should have developed. We became observers—and judges—rather than participants in their world.

But even before this, when we needed the involvement and affirmation of our fathers, our low self-esteem may have caused us to withdraw rather than to aggressively seek to have him meet our needs. Critical attitudes towards our fathers were developed very early on and in many men continued into adulthood.

With women drawn to lesbianism, the connection may be less frequent and less obvious, but we do see it. A woman who sees herself as unattractive or undesirable, especially in the social world of boys and girls, may retreat into the safe world of other women with similar problems. And here, bonding with other women and not relating to men, lesbian attractions can be formed.

The connection between low self-esteem and judgmentalism is easy to identify. Having low self-esteem, or an inferiority complex as it used to be called, is painful, and so we naturally look for ways to escape the pain. The real remedies are quite logical. As Christians we should seek to see ourselves as God sees us, the God who loves and accepts us as we are. And we should examine ourselves honestly to see where our real shortcomings are and then seek to do something about them.

The problem is that we seldom respond logically when it comes to emotional issues. Furthermore, these remedies require discipline and they demand that we venture into areas where we may have experienced failure and rejection in the past. For these reasons many of us take another route. If we can't lift ourselves up, we will pull others down. Intuitively we sense that our self-esteem is a product of how we see ourselves in comparison to others, so pulling them down has the same affect as lifting ourselves up—and it is much easier. In this process low self-esteem bears the bitter fruit of judgmentalism. We judge others, find them lacking, and start to feel better about ourselves, perhaps even superior to those we judge.

When I was in high school, I was a shy, skinny, athletically challenged, socially awkward boy. Furthermore, when I started high school my family had just moved into an area where most of my schoolmates were considerably more affluent than my family. My primary response was to label most of my schoolmates as snobs. The more popular another student was, the better looking or better dressed, the more athletic or the higher up in school politics, the more I disliked them and the more critical of them I became. And yes, I even felt superior to them.

As fruit often comes in a cluster, so the bitter fruit of judgmentalism often comes with a cluster of other sins. We see judgmentalism accompanied by a critical spirit (always being quick to criticize), anger (because others don't do what I think they should do), delusions of grandeur (a haughty spirit in Romans 1:30), cynicism, and perhaps central to all of it, pride—the pride that qualifies me to sit in judgment of others. The world has a good name for all of this: “sour grapes.”

We cannot possibly get into all of these sins here, but what we say about judgmentalism will generally apply to the other sins as well.

What Judging Is and What It Is Not

There is one little passage of Scripture recognized by more non-believers than any other. This came through to me the day I was writing this article. A letter to the editor appeared in *The Baltimore Sun* taking to task those who oppose homosexuality by “quoting the Bible ad infinitum.” The writer went on to say, “I thought the Bible told us not to judge other people.” Not knowing Scripture, this writer made the faulty assumption that the Bible does not distinguish between judging actions and judging people.

The New Testament, particularly the Epistles, abounds with Paul and others identifying specific behaviors as sinful. Although they may state what can happen to people who engage in specific sins, they are judging *behavior*, not people. God, and God only, is the judge of people.

How We Judge

If you, like me, battle being judgmental, it might help to look at three common forms that our judgments take:

1. *Assigning motives.* This is presumptuous; it assumes insights into a person's heart that we seldom have. “She was late because she doesn't care about anyone else's feelings.” This is always questionable because our judgments are always clouded by our feelings for the person. We assign bad motives to those people we don't like or to those with whom we are currently angry. All actions can be deemed selfish—“He only gave me the \$1,000 to make himself feel good”—if we are inclined to see them that way. In judging motives, we may be playing the amateur psychologist—a potentially dangerous practice. Avoid assigning motives.

2. *Labeling or defining a person.* Again, this can be extremely presumptuous; we assume a godlike role. Only our Father in Heaven is capable of defining who we truly are. We might say someone is a narcissist, a misogynist, or a codependent. By doing this, we categorize the person and make a judgment that is supposed to totally explain his or her behavior and character. This is dehumanizing; it reduces a person to a category. And it becomes a more common form of judging as we each pick up little bits of psychological jargon. Avoid labeling people.

3. *Weighing the offense; determining the level of guilt.* “You should be able to do better than this,” is a statement that none of us can make with absolute certainty. It is totally judgmental. We almost never have the insight, knowledge or understanding of a person or her background to make such judgments.

Generally, we should avoid determining levels of guilt—but not always. We have to make such judgments if we are to fulfill our God-given roles of authority. Thus the parent in the home, the judge in the courtroom, the supervisor in the workplace, the leader in the ministry, must make judgments as to degrees of guilt and as to extenuating circumstances that might excuse an offense. A child spills his milk, and the parent must decide whether or not this is an expected accident for a child of a certain age, or if it was something done out of carelessness. A boss or a leader must make certain subjective judgments in leading others to accomplish the goals of the organization or group. “Given the tools and the time that you had, there is no excuse for you not getting this newsletter out on time.” For poor performance to be admonished, and superior performance to be praised, judgments must be made. This is a burden of leadership. But we need to reserve this type of judgment for when we have a God-given authority role to fill.

How It Interferes With Our Healing

We are not discussing judgmentalism here just because it and homosexuality can come from the same root of low self-esteem, but more importantly because continuing in the sin of judgmentalism, we hinder our growth and healing in several ways.

First, constantly focusing on the faults of others, we can fail to look at the real source of our problems—ourselves. This may be our primary reason for being judgmental; it is a great defense mechanism. Absorbed with the faults of others, we have little time to examine our own hearts. And we ourselves are not so bad if others are worse by comparison.

Second, being judgmental and evidencing similar bitter fruit—being angry or having a critical spirit—makes us unattractive people, and others don't want to be with us. This isolates us and keeps us from being able to enter into the kinds of relationships that are a necessary part of our healing. Even where the judgmentalism and anger is buried beneath a “nice person” veneer, others see or sense that there is an unrealness about us, and they are put off by it.

Third, being judgmental is a sin, and like all unrepented and unconfessed sin, it interferes with the growth of our relationship with the Lord, the primary source of our healing. One reason that judgmentalism is a sin is that it violates the law of love. In the familiar love passage in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 13, I like how my old Jerusalem Bible translates verse 5: *love is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope . . .* Sinful judgmentalism is always ready to blame, to accuse, to think the worst. Judgmentalism hardens our hearts.

Battling Judgmentalism

It would be wonderful if our character would change to such an extent that we never even thought of being judgmental. To reach this point I suspect we would have had to reach a point of almost perfect humility towards ourselves and perfect love towards others. I am not there yet, so I must try to remember to engage in battle every time I start to judge.

The armory where I find all of my weapons for this battle is the Word of God. I can think of no other sin area in my life where there are more Scriptures that so precisely and so powerfully address the area of my struggle. Here are the ones that I use.

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? (Luke 6:41). Nothing short-circuits my unrighteousness judgments like this passage. I have a ready list of sins, bad habits, annoying traits and recurring selfish acts that I can bring to mind and compare with the fault in another that I am starting to criticize. When I do, my criticism usually deflates like the air going out of a balloon. If you don't have such a list, I suggest you make one.

Judge not, that you be not judged (Matthew 7:1). When I catch myself judging, I will say to God, “Lord, please don't judge me the way I'm judging him.” The thought of being so judged can bring real terror to me.

For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy (James 2:13). Like the passage above, this is a frightening thought.

For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things (Romans 2:1). We are often most critical of those traits in others that we most hate in ourselves. When being judgmental, check yourself to see if this isn't what is going on, and if it is, start confessing and asking God to forgive you.

And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles (Matthew 5:41). Very often what another does is truly objectionable and unreasonable. These words from the Sermon on the Mount call us to be “unreasonable” in our responses, in our kindness to others. This passage has special significance in our relationships with people who are regularly in our lives: family members, neighbors, co-workers, fellow church members. The decision to forgo our rights and accept the other person as he or she is, when it is made in response to the Lord's command, can bring great peace. In this peace we are set free from the need to judge.

If this is a problem with you, it may be time for you to step down from the throne of judgment, to come out from behind the judge's bench, to come down off the pedestal from which you observe and judge the world. Stop trying to make yourself feel better by judging others—even if you still find yourself struggling with judgementalism, let the Lord accept you as you are, His beloved, and therefore of inestimable worth.