

Dear members and friends of St. John,

"Judge not, that you be not judged. ² For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. ³ 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? ⁴ Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:1-5, ESV).

There are a few topics in my ministry that I frequently hear misquoted or misunderstood. One of the most frequent is **how we as Christians are to deal with a neighbor who is openly sinning**. The typical response that I hear is: "Judge ye not, lest ye be judged". For those of you who don't like Old English, I'll translate: Don't pass judgment on your neighbor's sin, or God will pass judgment against you. That comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, shown above.

This is what Rev. Dr. C. F. W. Walther (the first president of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod and a great Bible scholar) had to say on judging others:

When Christ tells us not to judge and condemn, He does not mean that no one is permitted to judge and condemn false doctrine or openly proclaim God's judgment of unbelieving and wicked people... The Lord says to all Christians, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matthew 7:15). How could the hearers beware of false prophets if they are not permitted to judge, reject, and condemn their false doctrine? Furthermore, Christ says that the members of the congregation should regard as heathens and tax collectors those who despise all their warnings. Must they not pass the judgment of condemnation upon them? Saint Paul writes, "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them" (Ephesians 5:11)... The rebuking, criticizing, judging and condemning of false doctrine and an obviously godless life are not forbidden by Scripture. Indeed, whoever fails to do this acts most lovelessly. For the Christians who sees his neighbor sinning, heading for destruction, and does not warn him about the great danger in which his soul lies, is viewed no differently by God from the one who is lost in sin because he failed to receive a warning. ⁽¹⁾

The correct interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount text about judging others is that God does not want you (in hypocritical fashion) to 'lord your goodness' over your neighbor. It's about 'elevating yourself' over them, pretending that you are worthy (by your own goodness) to be judge and jury over their sin. Notice what the end of Matthew 7:5 says: *"then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."* You are not forbidden to confront your brother. It's just the opposite – you **must do this**, but only when you understand your position before God as a sinner in need of His forgiveness, as well.

So who is more loving? The person who allows their friend's sin to go on without warning them, or the person that confronts their friend about their sin, and warns them what the word of God says about continuing in sin? The latter case, of course. And how do we go about doing this? Well, Galatians chapter 6 says: *"Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who*

are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness”(Gal. 6:1). Matthew 18 tells us that we should confront them privately, alone. This is what a loving brother does to someone that he wants to see restored to God. Our motivation is always a heartfelt concern for our neighbor. The unrepentant sinner (those who refuse to acknowledge their sin before God and others) are in a spiritual state that leads to eternal death – an eternity in hell – if they don’t repent before they die.

Finally, your pastor and elders, from time to time, may have to withhold Holy Communion from the openly willful sinner. Our Communion policy comes from God’s Word (1 Cor. 11:27-31) that warns everyone that receives Christ’s body and blood, must do so in a worthy manner.

Unrepentance - refusing to acknowledge one’s sin and refusing to try and turn away from it – makes a person unworthy. The Bible warns all of us that this leads to spiritual death. Withholding Holy Communion is a ‘wake-up call’ to that person, helping him or her to see the path of destruction that they’re currently on. Again, this is done out of love and concern for their wellbeing.

One of the most difficult things that a Christian must do is confronting his brother when he sins. It’s difficult for your pastor as well. But we must not hide from our responsibility – we must not cower from confrontation. Before you proceed – pray. Ask God for the wisdom to do this in a way that will restore your brother, and not send him away. And if your first attempt doesn’t appear to help, continue to pray, have no part in his sin, and seek opportunities to gently bring him back to repentance and eternal life in heaven. And through your actions, you will demonstrate how a *true friend* cares for someone he loves.

Pastor Travis

⁽¹⁾ Grabenhofer, G. P., *God Grant It – Daily Devotions from C. F. W. Walther*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, c. 2006, pp. 542-544.