



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

December 1986

## JUDGMENTALISM

When we go into church on Sunday morning and kneel down to say our prayers before the service, how often do our thoughts turn away from God to the other people who are gathered there. We think of what is wrong with them. Some of them are not reverent enough, at least by our standards. Some of them seem to dress ostentatiously. About some of them we have heard some nasty things by gossip. Some may even smell bad. In short, we find many reasons to look down on our fellow worshippers. If we are not careful, before we know it, instead of making a careful preparation for the service, we have spent our time judging our neighbors.

The service itself provides ample fodder for our judgmentalism. We may not like the music: the choir isn't very good, the hymns are too Victorian, the organist plays too slowly or with weird harmonizations, the hymns are not Victorian enough. The servers may not be well trained or else habitually spacey. The rite or some particular prayers being used may not be our favorite. And all this doesn't even touch the priest, who no doubt leaves much to be desired!

In the Church at large, there is also opportunity to be judgmental. Other Christians with practices differing from ours are ready objects, if not for our scorn, at least for our disdain. We know better, after all. High Churchmen look down on Low Churchmen (which does not mean that Low Churchmen look up to High Churchmen), conservatives disdain liberals, and so on. Each finds cause for judgment in the particular characteristics of his own practice.

Outside the Church we also find ourselves being judgmental. We condemn those who say they will do things for us and fail to follow through. We despise poor and impatient drivers. We look down on those with obvious faults. We especially look down on those with faults we also see in ourselves. (We tend

least forgiving of those things we dislike in ourselves.) Some days it seems that we can find fault with just about anyone.

It almost seems as if God has placed us in a situation where we cannot but be judgmental. There is so much opportunity! Yet most of us hate being like that. We know others who are consumed with judgmentalism -- and we know how tiresome they are, and how unpleasant they have made themselves. Being with them may make us feel good for a short time -- as we see all the things wrong with everyone else. But the enjoyment is short-lived, because we know that our perfection (implied in the comparison with others) is an illusion.

So what are we to do about it? We know that we do it. We hate ourselves for doing it, because we know we shouldn't, and yet it is very hard to stop.

Our Lord has told us, "Judge not that ye be not judged." He places our condemnation of others in the context of our relationship with God. If we do not wish to be judged we should not go and do it ourselves. If we want to be forgiven we must forgive. We cannot expect to sustain the kind of relationship with God that we want and at the same time cling to our judgmental habits in our dealings with other people.

Thus we must first examine our relationship with God. Is it based on a sound foundation? Often this is the source of our problem. We do not really believe in grace. We are trying to earn our salvation. We cannot accept that God gives it to us undeserved. Our religious activities are something we take a certain pride in. We then look down on those who do not do as much as we do, or do not seem to do it as religiously. Since our actions (if not our thinking) show that we are trying to earn our salvation by what we do, then we conclude that others who do not accomplish such things are lacking salvation. We compare and find ourselves better.

There is a further problem which arises from our attempts at self-salvation. Deep down we know that all our efforts are ultimately unable to accomplish that which we desire. Whether we admit it consciously or not, we know that in spite of all our good works, we remain sinners. Nothing we can do will ever really remove that cloud of guilt. We cannot undo the past. We can never convince ourselves otherwise. This means that we will be hard on ourselves, pushing ourselves to ever greater heights of good deeds and acts of piety. And as we are demanding of ourselves, so also we will be demanding of other people. Just as we condemn ourselves for falling short of perfection, we will condemn others as well.

We are bound to be judgmental of others if we are habitually judgmental of ourselves. If we do not accept our salvation as God's free gift, but try to earn it, we will be judgmental of ourselves, and thus of others. Whenever we see someone fall short of perfection, we will

condemn, as we feel God must condemn -- for we feel condemned whenever we fall short ourselves.

This all means that we must begin with ourselves if we are to stop being judgmental. We must concentrate on grace and forgiveness as God's gifts to us. All that we do in the spiritual and moral life is response to God's gift. The initiative and the power are all His and not ours. Moreover, we must believe in His forgiveness. Not all Christians really believe that they are and can be forgiven. It is after all a wondrous thing that God should freely forgive us what we have done wrong. But if we do not believe that central fact of the Christian religion, we are doomed to being judgmental, not to say sub-Christian.

Judgmentalism is intimately connected with forgiveness. To avoid being judgmental, we must learn to accept others' faults. We must learn that they are forgiven and redeemed by God. Others' faults do not always impinge on us directly. We may overhear someone's gossip, and condemn the talebearer in our hearts. But since the tale has nothing to do with us, there is really no sin against us. The sin is against another person, and against God, but not against us. So our forgiveness is not required. But what we must do is to believe that God offers forgiveness. Then we will not need to condemn. If God does not condemn then what justification have we for condemning?

This Jesus has told us when He asks us, "Who are you to judge another's servants?" We all belong to God, and He is responsible for us as our Master. We should learn to respect God's prerogatives in the matter. He has the right to judge His servants and to deal with them as He will. If we pretend to judge them ourselves, we are putting ourselves in God's place: we are pretending that we are gods.

Moreover, if we wish to judge, then we must give others the right to judge us the same way. Yet this is the very thing judgmentalism most abhors. In being judgmental we hope to establish our own righteousness by comparison with others' lack thereof. At the same time, we make every excuse for any imperfection or sin of our own. Our inconsistency shows the folly of being judgmental. If we do it ourselves, we must allow others to do it -- and then we cannot accomplish what we wish by it. Either it is a human prerogative (in which case we all can do it), or else it is God's prerogative alone (whether He chooses to exercise it or not) and we must give it up.

There are times, of course, when we are judgmental about someone's action which is a sin against us. Then we must forgive. In such situations, forgiveness is the alternative to condemnation. Forgiveness is not always easy (Jesus died in the process, after all), but it must be done if we are to receive the forgiveness we need from God.

In all of this, we see that the way to avoid being judgmental is to imitate God. We should take the way He treats us as the standard for how

to treat one another. He forgives: so should we. He does not condemn but pardons: so should we. He accepts the evil of sin and swallows it up in His love: so should we.

The key to avoiding judgmentalism is love. We are to love as God loves. Love takes us out of ourselves, seeking what is best for the other instead of seeking ways to exalt ourselves. We must first love ourselves as God loves us, believing that we are sinners forgiven by His grace. This is the only way we will have much chance of loving others. If we do not believe that we are loved, then we will hardly believe that we can ourselves love or that others are lovable. So we must practice accepting God's love -- especially when we feel most unlovable. We must acknowledge our sin, but also acknowledge that He does not let it stand between us and Him. Then we will know the reality of God's love for us. We will know that He does not condemn, and if He does not condemn we need not condemn ourselves either.

Then we must go on from loving ourselves as God loves us to loving others as God loves them. Of course, He loves them in exactly the same way He loves us. So having learned how He loves us, we already know how He loves others. We have only to learn to practice that love ourselves. This means seeing in others something of that divine image which God has placed there, and knowing that each person is a sinner for whom Christ died. Each is loved by God, and is therefore precious. It will be hard for us to love some people this way: our feelings don't support our will. But this is what it means to forgive as we are forgiven, to judge not that we be not judged.

Third, we must learn to love others as we love ourselves. This is the Second Great Commandment that Jesus gives us. We must offer the same excuses for their faults as we would offer for our own. And we must allow that a fault or two (or ten or twenty) does not mean that a person is worthy of condemnation and unlovable.

We can learn not to be judgmental. We must admit that we are doing it and that it is unchristian. Then we must seek to replace it as our habitual way of dealing with people. But we cannot just tear out our judgmentalism without replacing it with something else. That simply does not work: it leaves a vacuum and our old habits rush back in. As judgmentalism is driven out, it must be replaced with the habit of Christian love. Our attack on judgmentalism is then twofold. First, we commit ourselves to the rigorous discipline of stopping ourselves every time we are judgmental. Then, we must seek to replace the judgmentalism with love. This is the real goal: that we may be so filled with Christian love that it overflows and envelops all those around us.

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