

Making Judgments

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April 23, 2023

INTRODUCTION

Our mind is a judgment-making machine...

- I like this
- I don't like that
- I will do this
- But not that

Throughout our waking hours we churn through countless "judgments"

- what to wear
- what to eat
- what to say or do
- when to work or rest

Most of these judgments are routine and not spiritually significant...

For example,

Deciding whether or not to wear a short-sleeved or a long-sleeved shirt is a very different kind of judgment from deciding whether or not to cover up a lie!

The point being that some judgments are very important because they deal with...

"right and wrong"

w/ matters of truth (or falsity) and with matters of good (or evil)

...these judgments have a *profound* impact on society and our own spiritual growth and development.

THE CHALLENGE

But here's the challenge - it's hard to have a conversation these days about judgment because the very word itself carries such a negative connotation...

Who are you to judge?, people say.

This question has the assumption that the one making the judgment is taking the moral "high ground" and is therefore "better" than everyone else.

But is that the purpose of judgments, to place ourselves above others?

Interestingly, it is the Scriptures themselves that are used as the reason why we shouldn't make judgments...

*Judge not that you be not judged
He who is w/out sin, let him cast the first stone*

Well, there's a lot of mistrust and confusion and hurts swirling around this topic of judgment...

which is why it's important to re-visit what the Lord teaches in His Word

because we have to make personal judgments
because we have to decide between right and wrong for ourselves
- it's a big part of our own regeneration, spiritual growth

AND we also have to make judgments about society

(and it is these types of judgment that cause tremendous angst amongst us - amongst our friends, our families, in the workplace, at dinner parties - everywhere)

So we read in our reading today that we do need to make judgments about society/our neighbor, those around us, because the very fabric of society rests on

an ethical, moral code that needs to be upheld if society is to thrive and prosper and not crumble.

And as is the case with many things, the challenge is not in the WHAT (namely, that we need to make judgments), the challenge is in the HOW...

How should we judge?

First, in making judgments we need to remember to not lose sight of the goal, the end in view:

In working side-by-side with the mass of humanity we call "society" we are charged with looking to the best in our neighbor, looking to the good in others wherever we find it...

"...good is the goal for all in heaven, whereas evil is the goal for all in hell..." (ML 453)

"A life of charity involves thinking well of people, wanting what is good for them, and in feeling joy within ourselves that others too are saved. If we wish to see no one saved but those who believe as we do, and particularly if we resent any other arrangement, our life is not one of charity or neighborly love" (AC 2284:5)

So, in our judgments we *judge as we'd like to be judged...* (namely with the presumption of good will)

This can be hard for all parties involved because...

- we live in a world of tense political division
- of strong partisan animosity
- and we can unwittingly become a part of this animosity...

silently building our case against each other
mentally listing our grievances as to why we can't get along.

When we get swept up in this **hyper-critical environment**, and a *hyper-critical* environment is what it is, we find ourselves...

pitted against each other

in public
in our homes
in our schools
and in the church

And the challenge is that since our minds are wired to be judgment-making machines,

we can quite easily (and perhaps too willingly) join the critical judgment brigade...

because when left to our own devices, as one teaching says, our "unregenerate self" simply self wants to judge anyone and everyone
- no one is as good or right as us

It's extremely harsh and critical and unforgiving (see AC 1079)

It is extremely common for us to form an opinion about some religious point of faith and then judge that other people cannot be saved unless they believe what we do, even though the Lord forbade this (Matthew 7:1,2).

(AC 2284:4)

This is why we need the Lord's help

because, from the standpoint of the Word,

not all judgments are equal or *necessary* and, again, it's not so much *that* we need to make judgments as it is in *HOW* we make them...

HEALTHY VS. UNHEALTHY JUDGMENTS

The Lord gives us a powerful tool to make wise, respectful judgments.

He says,

"With the measure you use, it will be measured back to you" (Mt. 7:2),

meaning we need to pay attention to the type of attitude we "measure out" when making judgments.

That we need to judge between good and evil...

in ourselves and in others, is not the issue:

"It is allowable for everyone to think about the moral and civil life of another, and also to judge it, for without such thought and judgment no civil society could exist" (AE 629:14).

The issue is the *quality* of spirit behind our judgment...

Is it mean, angry, and vengeful like the spirit of the Scribes and Pharisees who wished to condemn the woman caught in adultery...

Or kind, just, and respectful?

This is what the Lord meant when He said,

"Judge not that you be not judged."

It means don't judge thinking *"evil of the neighbor"* (AE 629:14).

So, the balance we're trying to strike is...

- staying true to what we believe
...while not thinking ill of our neighbor because they believe something different from us.

It sounds so simple, but it isn't because in issues of "right and wrong" tensions run extremely high whether that be in politics or religion.

In determining how we are "measuring out" our judgment, we...

Have to ask ourselves, do I have the full picture?
 Am I really understanding or "getting" what this person is saying?
 And most importantly, can I know the *intent* of this person, why they're saying what they're saying?

This seems to be why the Lord says,

"Do not judge according to [the] appearance, but judge with righteous judgment" (John 7:24)

Or as the New International Version puts it:

"Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly..."

Even Swedenborg got fooled by appearances:

"I have met many spirits who, in the world, had lived like others in outward appearances - dressing grandly, dining elegantly, doing business like others at a profit, attending theatrical performances, joking about the actions of lovers in a seemingly lustful manner, and other like things. And yet the angels attributed these things to some as sinful evils, and to others as not evil, declaring the former guilty, but the latter innocent" (ML 453).

Swedenborg was surprised by this, taken aback, and was told by the angels that it had everything to do with a person's *intention and end (or goal)*, and that a person is excused or condemned accordingly.

The passage ends by saying:

Therefore, the angels excuse or condemn those whom the end excuses or condemns. This, too, the angels said, and nothing else, is meant by the Lord's words, Judge not, that you be not condemned." (Matthew 7:1)

So, in making judgments we need to remember that we cannot judge a person's intention or end.

JUDGMENT BOUNDARIES

One last important teaching.

The Lord draws a *crucial* distinction between making a judgment...

and carrying out the "sentence" of that same judgment.

The former is necessary for the sake of society...

but the latter is not permitted because it crosses a boundary

...by adding an accusatory and condemnatory spirit to the judgment (see John 8).

We learned about this distinction in the account from John with the woman caught in adultery.

1. A woman had sinned - caught in the act, was a permissible judgment
2. Yes, you are right to call it a sin (go and sin no more), make a judgment. It was wrong. We need to do that.
3. But no, you are not allowed to carry out the punishment (he who is without sin, let him cast the first stone).
4. *"Where are those accusers of yours?" "Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord" And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more." (John 8:10,11)*

There's a big difference between saying to someone or thinking (and we spend a lot of time "rehearsing" and re-hashing judgments in our mind):

"I see what you are saying (or doing) and I disagree"

And saying:

"I can't believe you think that! What's wrong with you?"

[Key point] One is leaving the other person in freedom, the other is crossing a boundary and imputing motive...

The Ancient Law of the Pledge - Deuteronomy 24:10-11 teaches us about respecting boundaries...

[The Israelite lender (the one offering to lend money) was not permitted to go into the house of the borrower to claim his pledge (deposit) but was required to stand outside, leaving the borrower in freedom (in the safety of their house) to either accept or reject the terms of the loan.]

"Not going into the house but standing outside to receive the pledge (collateral)" means not pressuring or inciting someone to affirm our understanding of truth (sua vera) but listening to the other person's response and accepting their answer for what it is. If we pressure or incite others to affirm our truth, we keep them from thinking and speaking for themselves, forcing them to follow our lead instead.

Secrets of Heaven 9213

CONCLUSION

In making judgments let us...

1. Look to the good in others. It sets us off on the right footing.
2. Remember the principle of the Golden Rule, that we must judge as we'd like to be judged (with the presumption of good will).
3. Remember that not all judgments are equal or necessary and that the balance we're trying to strike is to stay true to what we believe while not thinking ill of our neighbor or imputing motive.
4. Remember to respect boundaries, that we cannot and shouldn't judge another person's intent, and that no one has to believe what we believe and that they should be left in freedom to make up their own mind (as per the Law of the Pledge, Deut. 24:10-11).

In this way, with the Lord's help, we are able to break a difficult and confusing subject down to size...

and find ourselves more at peace with our judgments because we've been shown the parameters for...

When they should start

And when they should stop

AMEN.