

In a Position to Judge  
Jude  
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This Sunday, you are going to get a theological twofer, a “Why is *That* in the Bible” look at the book of Jude, AND the long awaited sermon on the theological buzzword, judgment. Late last year, I did a little series on some of what I called the Code Words of our vocabulary of faith, words we use a lot in church, important words, but words which can be a barrier to those without a long term acquaintance with them. We looked at the word faith, and then righteousness, but I fell ill for the Sunday on which I was going to tackle the word judgment, and already had something planned for the following week, and so it was left hanging in the balance, if you’ll excuse the pun.

A quick look at the slender book of Jude, however, reveals that it is the perfect Biblical passage to explore the word judgment, if only because Jude is so bent on his opponents being judged for their heretical ways. “For certain intruders have stolen in among you, people who long ago were designated for this condemnation as ungodly, who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.” Harsh words from the book of love. Indeed, the book of Jude is perhaps most frequently described with the word “invective,” most of its 25 verses reserved for saying nasty things about people who were perceived as threats to the early church. But even though the truth hurts,

in this case, it will help us understand more about what the Bible has to say about judgment, why it comes upon us, to whom is it directed, when might we expect it, and who gets to execute it. The book of Jude is certainly not the last word on the idea of judgment, but it summarizes very well the concept.

In the New Testament Greek, the collection of words used for judgment, or judging, has a wide range of meaning. At the most basic level of the term judgment, is the idea of simply having an opinion, of choosing between two colors to paint the walls of your house, or what you will have for dinner, or whether you will open a Facebook account. We all judge because we are all faced with options about which we must make decisions, and so we do. Moving up from there, we find judging in the sense of discriminating or discerning which option may actually be better, or more right, or more godly, and not necessarily simply a matter of taste or preference, as in the first level. And so we might judge between two job offers, or whether to buy a more expensive car, or to recycle our cans and bottles. In these decisions, there is a little more at stake, consequences, so to speak, either to ourselves, or to others, or to our planet. There is more reflection here on the so-called “opportunity cost,” of evaluating not only what I might be gaining by choosing one of the options, but also what I might potentially be giving up by not choosing the other one.

Then, there is the more legal aspect of the term, from which we get the courtroom drama, the police detectives, the prison system, and all the rest. Human

societies, whether or not they are people who see themselves as a people under God, choose certain standards that they consider that society's norm, and members of that society must live by those norms or face some kind of consequences.

Because it is not always easy to determine whether someone has actually transgressed one of those societal boundaries, and because we often have differing opinions about those boundaries, someone gets to be the judge, and decide if the perceived transgressor really did choose to live or act by a different standard, and whether he or she will have to face consequences. Related to this use of the term is the idea of judging as condemnation, not just the rendering of the verdict, but the sentence itself, the fine, probation, banishment, imprisonment, beheading, burning at the stake, what have you. But we are still here in the human realm of judging, where no matter how many safeguards we put in place, we are still prone to mistakes, mixed motives, and mischief that call into question even our best efforts at doing what seems best for our human communities.

Which makes it good news, then, that God also judges. And so, in both the Old and New Testaments, it is clear that God has the last word on judgment, and that that word is ultimately and completely just, right, and true. Of course, the things about which God judges may or may not precisely correspond to some legal code, but that is OK because some things will surely fall through the cracks of even the best legal system. You see, as the old saying goes, you can't legislate morality, or for that matter generosity, or kindness, of patience, or forgiveness, or a

host of other virtues on which rest a society in which one might genuinely want to live, or one that resembles what we call God's kingdom. As creator of the universe, as the source of all wisdom, as one who has been subject to the errors of human judicial systems, God, we acknowledge, is the one in whom we can, and must, ultimately place our trust and fate. Would you really want anyone else? And so, we come to the final use of the term judgment to refer to the final judgment, the divine judgment at moment of death, or at the end of time, or at the second coming of Christ, or at the reading of the book of life, whenever comes that Day of the Lord, that Day of Judgment when God decides whether you will spend eternity walking on streets paved with gold in the New Jerusalem, or being dangled over a pit of fire like a spider or some other loathsome insect. The author of the book of Jude believes the latter is the destiny reserved for those intruders about which he is warning the church and pulls no punches in saying so. Apparently, Jude is in a position to judge.

All of that is a quick rundown on what constitutes judgment in the Bible, and in varying degrees you see these ideas reflected in the book of Jude we read tonight. The believers have chosen, judged, the Gospel to be true and worth following. They have discerned, judged, perhaps unwisely, about letting in these intruders who are now corrupting the human community called the church. There are standards for this community, perhaps not strictly legal, but decidedly there, that Jude judges they have transgressed. And, of course, there is the hope, and

indeed the certainty, that God will judge both the righteous and the sinner. But beyond the fact that in Jude we see the range of the uses of the term judgment, there is something even more useful for us, namely some hints about the nature and practice of judgment which might guide us as we go through our lives being called upon to make decisions of all kinds, the kind that guide of families and business and ministries, or even sometimes life or death decisions, as when we might sit for jury duty.

The first of these is to remember that God will judge us not on our adherence to doctrine, but on how we have behaved. In many places in Scripture, but particularly in the famous picture of the judging of the sheep and the goats in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, and in the opening of the book of life in the twentieth chapter of Revelation, it is clear that God will judge us on the basis of our deeds, and not whether we had chosen the right set of beliefs about God. Did we care for those in need? Did we protect the widow and the orphan and the stranger in our midst? And so we see Jude placing the emphasis on behavior as the basis on which his opponents will be judged. Those who have “stolen in” are behaving badly: “These are grumblers and malcontents; they indulge their own lusts; they are bombastic in speech, flattering people to their own advantage.” It is not necessarily that their beliefs or doctrines about God are wrong, per se, although they are probably enough out of whack that they can justify their behavior. Indeed, they conform enough to the image of a Christian that they were allowed entry into

the community in the first place. But it is what they do – “defile the flesh, reject authority, and slander the glorious ones” – that earn them their bad marks.

Some have called what these malcontents practice antinomianism, a perspective that suggests that it matters not what one does so long as one expresses a sincere faith doing it. So, I may be a murderer who says, “Bless me Father, for I have sinned” while pulling the trigger, and expect to get off with a few “Hail Mary’s,” rather than a prison sentence or an eternity in the pit of fire, not to suggest this attitude begins or ends with Roman Catholics, of course, but it helps make the point. I can expect this because I interpret my freedom in Christ to a liberty from any law that can ensnare me, so complete is the spirit of grace in my salvation. Despite the fact that it is a quite ridiculous notion, it is one we employ fairly regularly in one form or another, whether in little white lies or a betrayal of personal trust. On one hand, we rightly entrust ourselves to God’s infinite grace, and on the other, try to take advantage of that grace to get what we want without any eternal consequences. And so we might try to justify taking advantage of the mistake the Walmart scanner has made in our favor, by saying that we are in a much needier condition than the Walton family, and that the spirit of Robin Hood must always be preserved for the sake of the poor, or that the item in question was really overpriced anyway and that Walmart was just taking advantage of our need. But we have still broken a law, by not paying for that item what we really should have paid, and worse, we have dishonored God by not doing what was right. To

this way of thinking, Jesus is the wonderfully over-permissive parent who never punishes bad behavior, the Jesus meek and mild of our hymns who would never see anyone called to account for their bad behavior. It is unconditional love run amok and it makes for a bad witness, and Jude calls it out in his letter.

Bad behavior, however, is not judged out of context. What actually makes the behavior bad is what it does to other people, and specifically in Jude, to the church. And so, our second clue from Jude about judgment is that it must be more about relationships than retribution. Jude couldn't have cared less that his opponents behaved badly except that it was negatively affecting the rest of the community. No one in his day and age expected anyone not in the church to behave well anyway. But to say you are a Christian, and to behave badly, is to leave yourself open to criticism and judgment. "It is these people," he says, "It is these worldly people, devoid of the spirit, who are causing divisions." "They are blemishes on your love feasts," he says, and the word "blemishes" can also be translated as reefs, the kind you find in the ocean. They are reefs upon which the church may find itself shipwrecked, and thus they are worthy of God's judgment. And what will be the result of the divisions, and the discord in the church? A weaker witness to those outside the church who behave badly, the very people who need the genuine community the church offers to change their behavior, and not be judged negatively when that terrible day comes. Throughout the Bible, whether it is in the examples Jude gives of when God has already judged, or in the law itself,

or in the words of John the Baptist or Jesus about repentance and judgment, the purpose of God's judgment is about promoting God's vision of abundant life, of inviting every person into a relationship with God. The purpose of judgment is not to punish, but to prepare hearts and minds for a life worth living.

And finally, Jude instructs us that there are limits to our human judgment, that we are not to take matters into our own hands, no matter how grievous we might feel the situation to be. Despite all of his opinions about his opponents, from the very beginning of the letter, Jude invites the church not to burn them at the stake, or even cast them out, but "to contend for the faith," to be a witness of the right way to live, and let the malcontents be judged when stacked up against the truly faithful. "But you, beloved," he says, "build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life." Isn't that beautiful advice? But wait, there's more: "And have mercy on some who are wavering; save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled on their bodies." There is no revenge here, there is no call to purify others but to begin with ourselves, and to make sure we are not behaving badly. And then to invite others through mercy, rather than judgment, to this wonderful thing we call the church. Make no mistake: judgment is coming! But it must be God who does the judging, not us, not even the angels! "But when

the archangel Michael contended with the devil for the body of Moses,” Jude reminds them, Michael left it for God to judge, saying, “The Lord rebuke you!”

It is our place to choose among options. It is our place to be discriminating and discerning. It is even our place to order our societies, and pass judgment on those who behave badly in our midst. But it is not our place to play God, and to decide for God whether or not people behaving badly are worth being loved and respected at the most fundamental level of their humanity. In our choosing, in our discriminating, even in our human judges and juries, we must make the distinction between the person and their defiled tunic. We cannot be in the business of deciding whether someone is worthy of God’s love or God’s condemnation by exacting the punishment we think fits the crime, if it is any more severe than protecting our communities from further harm. It is not only so-called “uncivilized” societies which extract an eye for an eye that are behaving badly, but also those which believe it morally permissible to torture and execute in the name of their national brand of justice. I think it is here that we would do well to recall Jesus’ words about judging others, that we must not judge others, lest we be judged ourselves. He is not saying we must be naïve, or permissive of everything, but rather that we avoid falling into the trap of mistaking God’s role for our own, and rendering a verdict only God is fit to render. For we will be judged by God on the basis of how we have judged other people, and if we have done that in a way that

suggests that they are unworthy of God's love, and our own, then we too will find ourselves deemed unworthy of that love whenever that day of judgment may come.

Why are the nasty tone and uncharitable attitude of Jude part of our Bibles? To remind us that no matter how we may feel about someone, even someone worthy of God's condemnation, there are both limits to, and graceful possibilities for, acting on those feelings. You see, Jude doesn't end on a nasty note, but on a hopeful one that helps us put it all into perspective: "Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and for ever." And let all of God's people say Amen.