

## Judgment, Justice, and the Limits of Tolerance

(last in a series on the Life of Religion)

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Jesus said, “Do not judge according to the appearance, but judge with just judgment” (John 7:24).

Things are not always the way they appear to be. In fact it may be a truism that things are not *usually* the way they appear to be. This is one of the reasons we are given what we call Divine Revelation, or “the Word.”

The information that comes to us through our senses is very important: it teaches and guides us, and helps us to establish our unique identity based on our unique experience of life in response to the environment around us. But it can be misleading! An optical illusion, a rumor, an artificial scent or flavor, even something as “obvious” as an object you can touch may not be at all what it seems to be. Just imagine your surprise when you step on a “stick” that turns out to be a snake, or when you bite into a perfectly good-looking apple only to find out that it’s thoroughly rotten or has worms inside. Appearances can be deceiving.

This is why we are taught in the New Church that we can never make definitive spiritual judgments about other people.

“A general judgment such as: ‘If in internals you are what you appear to be in externals you will be saved or condemned,’ is allowed; but a particular judgment such as, ‘You are such in internals and therefore will be saved or condemned,’ is not allowed” (CL 523).

One implication of this teaching is that we *can* make judgments about other people, but we can only judge from what we really know. In fact, judgments are absolutely necessary. We read,

“It is a common opinion at this day, that everyone is equally the neighbor, and that benefits are to be conferred on everyone who needs assistance; but it is in the interest of Christian prudence to examine well the quality of a person’s life, and to exercise charity to him accordingly. The man of the internal church exercises his charity with discrimination, consequently with intelligence; but the man of the external church, because he is not able thus to discern things, does it indiscriminately” (NJHD 85).

Of course the word, discrimination, has a negative connotation today; perhaps a better word would be discernment. But in common speech we simply call it *good judgment*.

And that’s the critical point: the “good” always has to go together with the “judgment.” If it doesn’t, then the judgment always condemns, since no one is perfect and the truth exposes all our faults. On the other hand, good or love excuses evil and strives constantly to save. The “trick” is to find the balance, or rather to join the two things together in such a way that they complement each other: good and truth, love and wisdom, justice and judgment, affection and thought, freedom and reason. Either element of these pairs without the other generally spells disaster.

In fact, this is partly the problem that the traditional Christian Church tries to solve with their doctrine of the Trinity: God the Father, as represented in the Old Testament, is seen as harsh and condemning when people mess up, requiring sacrifices and all sorts of particular obedience to be in His “good books.” But Jesus is seen as all love and forgiveness, sacrificing Himself to appease the wrath of God the Father. Unfortunately this doesn’t work with the teachings themselves, since the God of the Old Testament is also represented as merciful and kind, “full of compassion and gracious, longsuffering and plenteous in mercy” (Psalm 86:15), and Jesus is also very clear about His purpose, saying, “For **judgment** I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind” (John 9:39). In fact, the theme of John’s Gospel from beginning to end is about the revelation of light, culminating in His words to Pilate, “For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to *the truth*” (John 18:37). In one place in Matthew He even said, “Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. *I did not come to bring peace but a sword!*” (Matt. 10:34).

Of course it all adds up when you remember that God Himself came into the world (John 1:14), and that His purpose actually was to re-unite the goodness and the truth that people had separated by their abuse of Biblical law for selfish and worldly gain (see TCR 85-88). So although He taught the truth He did so with love – just as Jehovah had done for the Jews – but while in His visible Humanity He did so more fully and more convincingly than ever before.

Now the issues we face are nicely summed up in the Lord’s own words from two different parts of the Gospels: - In Matthew 7 we read, “Judge not, that you be not judged...” and this aligns perfectly with all His teachings about patience, humility, forgiveness, non-resistance, non-violence and so on. However in John 7 (v. 24) we also read, “Do not judge according to the *appearance*, but *judge with just judgment*,” the word, just, is “righteous” in the old translations but only refers to what is *right* in the sense that it is *just or good*, and this aligns perfectly with all the other teachings about using prudence, reason and discernment as we determine what to do – so that it truly benefits everyone in the long term.

The point is, ***we have to judge***, we have no choice. Every day and every ***hour*** of every day brings dilemmas that require our thought, reflection, reason, and ultimately judgment – for good or for ill. The question is, will we judge according to the appearance or will we judge with good, that is, with “just judgment”?

The Lord clearly teaches us that we should do good to *everyone*, both our friends and our enemies, both the evil and the good (Matt. 5:43-47). But doing good to the evil does NOT mean aiding, abetting or in modern terms *enabling* their evil. In THAT sense, the doctrines warn, “doing good to the evil is doing evil to the good” (AC 3820). Here is the teaching in context and in a modern translation that avoids the use of difficult terms (note that the reference to external and internal truths relates to outward appearances and the deeper realities within them); we read,

“Those governed by external truths know no more than the general truth that good should be done to the poor. They do not know how to tell who are truly the poor, let alone know that in the Word the expression ‘the poor’ is used to mean those who are so spiritually. Consequently they do good to bad people and to good ones alike, without realizing that doing good to bad people is doing harm to the good, for the bad are then given the opportunity to do harm to those who are good. *This is why people possessing this kind of simple zeal are infested so strongly by the crafty and deceitful.* But those governed by internal truths know

who the poor are, tell one poor person from another, *and do good to each according to his individual character.*”

To a thief, this may mean incarceration – with the hope that he will reform! But to a philanthropist it may mean tax deductions – to encourage more philanthropy! The thing is, we want to reward good behavior – as far as we can determine that it is good – and penalize bad behavior, also to the extent that we can agree on what is bad. Ultimately the definition comes from the Lord, but since a lot of people don’t believe in the Lord OR eternal life we have to base our natural decisions on the love of the neighbor and what makes sense for the long term in this world. But again, these things if true will always agree with what the Lord teaches, and so with enough insight we can all come to the same conclusions.

As an illustration of the Lord’s beautiful combination of love and wisdom, or judgment and justice, recall the familiar story of the woman caught in adultery (in John 8): the Lord did not condemn her, but He did tell her in no uncertain terms to “Go and sin no more.” Who knows why she had committed adultery, or even if it was her fault. What about the man involved, anyway? Why wasn’t HE accused? In any case this woman must have been terrified by the consequences and quite ready to do whatever the Lord said. So... mission accomplished. The point of punishment is reformation, and if the reformation can be achieved without it so much the better. The Lord certainly did not condone adultery, but neither did He condemn the woman.

The question for us, now, is how well we can emulate the Lord’s perfect combination of goodness and truth, and in that context *how much we can tolerate* of evil or falsity before we are obliged to take action against it. Good and evil may be mixed up together for a long time and for many necessary reasons, but sooner or later there has to be a judgment and the two have to be separated. Generally speaking the *last judgment* for each individual is at the time of death and resurrection into the spiritual world, but since people continue in their evils even after death we find this notable observation in the doctrines of the New Church: –

“The experience of the evil in the next life is that they are not punished until their evils have reached their peak; this applies to evils both in general and in particular. Indeed the balance of everything in the next life is such that evil punishes itself, that is, those who are evil run into the punishment of their evil, but only when this evil has reached its peak. *Every evil has its own limits* – varying from one individual to another – *beyond which it is not allowed to go*. When one who is evil goes beyond it he meets head on with punishment. This is so in every particular case” (AC 1857:2).

What can we learn from this about our lives in *this* world? Well, first of all, and as we all know from personal experience, the Lord allows every one of us to get away with an awful lot of foolishness before He calls us on it. He allows it for the sake of our freedom, and we enjoy that freedom, and we take advantage of it, and we shouldn’t be too disappointed when we get caught once in a while. But applying the same rule to others, it’s important to exercise as much tolerance of their mistakes as possible, until they really start to hurt others.

So we have a system of warnings for many infractions or disorders, and only when the warnings fail to get results do we go after the offender. But the second point is that *we do eventually go after the offender*. We have to, or the whole world would fall into chaos. Of course we can’t take the law into our own hands, we have to work with appropriate authorities according to the

general perception of what is useful and good for the whole community. But we do and must for the sake of order and the freedom of the innocent *insist on reasonable behavior*.

For example, let's say there's a bully at work, or in your neighborhood or school; he or she might even be someone in authority over you. What can you do? A first response might be simply to mind your own business, or to respond with hopefully *disarming kindness*. If there's any merit to the bully's threats you can try to address the concerns diplomatically, staying as detached as possible emotionally, realizing that this isn't necessarily your problem. But when the situation becomes intolerable you simply have to speak up, if not to the bully then to someone in authority who can help – for his sake, for the sake of the community or institution, for the sake of other potential victims, and, of course, for yourself.

But let's take it to another level. Besides our personal struggles and our concerns about public safety our society and culture now seems almost obsessed with issues of personal freedom and what we used to call victimless crimes. The general presumption seems to be that anything goes, as long as it gets results or is between consenting adults. Well, maybe. But it's a slippery slope. When people demand acceptance of any sort of deviant behavior the rights and freedoms of those who wish to maintain the standards taught in the Word are inevitably diminished. Besides, there is a spiritual sphere associated with every sort of behavior and it is not limited to a particular place. So, what hurts any one or two people ultimately hurts all others who come into their sphere of life. Do we therefore condemn them? *No, of course not*. But neither do we condone their actions, and we certainly do not change the rules to accommodate their wishes.

True justice always goes hand in hand with judgment, that is, good judgment, and good judgment ultimately comes from the Source of all love and wisdom, the Lord in His Word. So let us be vigilant in our own lives and for the spiritual lives of all around us by doing our best to maintain the standards that He has given us, while being mindful every day that He permits an awful lot of evil for the sake of our spiritual freedom, *and we can, too, up to a point*. The challenge is to see just where that point is, and what to do about it.

To that end the Lord has given us the spiritual meaning of His teaching about what to do if a “brother” sins against us (mentioned in the second lesson and the children's talk). First, the word, brother, spiritually refers to charity, or what is good in a person, so going to a brother first of all means appealing to what is good, kind, or caring, staying focused on the good and *not dwelling on the evil*. In the second step, “witnesses” refer to truths, not just one but two or more, so that the whole matter can be *rightly understood*. And finally, if all else fails, “the church” refers to the whole life of useful, spiritual service to the Lord and our neighbors. So when all else fails we must do what is best for the spiritual welfare of all concerned, even if it means bringing a judgment against what is offensive or separating ourselves from that offensiveness. By these means the Lord can help us maintain order in our own lives, protect the innocent among us, and use us to improve almost any situation, no matter how dark or discouraging it may be.

Amen.

Lessons:     *Matthew* 7:1-20 & 18:15-18  
                  Children's talk on how to settle arguments  
                  *Psalms* 37: selections  
                  *Arcana Coelestia* #8120-8122