

In the devil's attacks on the Church, he employs all sorts of different tactics and methods. At times, he'll use worldly wealth and pleasure to try to lure Christians away. Other times, he'll attack more directly, with open persecution, even violence, to try to scare Christians away.

But one of the most frequent strategies he uses is deceit. As the father of lies, the devil constantly tries to undermine the truth and raise doubts in the hearts of God's people. He often does this by twisting the Scriptures themselves, ripping them out of context and warping their meaning.

He did this to Christ when he tempted Him in the wilderness, and he does it to those who bear Christ's name even today. If the deceiver can get us to doubt God's Word, to ask in our hearts "Did God really say?," then he has seriously wounded our faith.

Therefore, we Christians need to know God's Word and know it well, so that when the devil comes and tries to attack us in this way, we can use the Word to drive him off instead.

One of the most misused portions of Scripture – and so one we need to understand well – comes from our Gospel reading this morning, also found in the parallel passage in Matthew 7. You can probably guess what it is without me even telling you. "Judge not, and you will not be judged." Often, it's even just shortened to "Judge not."

Ever heard that? This is one that people love to twist and misuse, usually to defend their sinful behavior. Confronted with God's Word exposing sinful words or deeds, a person might reply "Judge not!"

Supposedly, Jesus is saying in this verse that you don't have the authority to speak out against sin, that it's not the place of Christians to proclaim God's Law to the world. It's used in all sorts of contexts, as I'm sure you've heard before.

People want to indulge in their lustful desires and live contrary to God's design for marriage and chastity? "Judge not!" People want to pursue pleasure, "having fun and loving life," above loving the Lord with all their heart, mind, and strength? "Judge not!" People want to groom children into depravity, glorifying what God calls abominations? "Judge not!"

It's used like a Monopoly get-out-of-jail-free card, supposedly nullifying everything else that the Bible says. For some, "judge not" is pretty much the message of Christianity in a nutshell.

The thing is, though, this horrible misuse of Scripture breaks down pretty quick when you consider the entire rest of Scripture. There are countless examples of judgment all throughout it!

For instance, when Adam and Eve eat of the forbidden fruit in the Garden, do they get away with it because "Judge not?" No, they come under the just judgment of God, whose declaration that, "in the day you eat of it, you shall surely die" comes true, and they begin heading toward the grave that moment.

Or when the prophets are sent to confront Israel and Judah with their sins, do they stop speaking after being told "Judge not?" No, the prophets speak God's Word to the people, and when the people reject it, the nations of Assyria and Babylon are sent as God's agents of judgment, bringing destruction and slavery.

Now maybe these examples are too “Old Testament,” and the New Testament is all about hippie Jesus and his mellow disciples just loving on everyone. Except, Jesus Himself told His followers, “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.”

When Jesus was brought a woman caught in adultery, He didn’t say, “Judge not.” No, He confronted all the accusers with their own sins, and then told the woman, “Go, and sin no more.”

In the earliest days of the New Testament Church, Peter was confronted by a couple – Ananias and Sapphira – who tried to lie about what they were giving so that they might get worldly recognition, does Peter figure, “Who am I to judge?” No, after giving each of them a chance to repent, which they reject, Peter pronounces God’s judgment against them – and they are carried away, dead.

To say that the Gospel is “Judge not, let people do whatever they want to do,” is to ignore the entire message of repentance in the Scriptures. And without repentance, there is no forgiveness of sins, no life, no salvation.

So what do we make of the verse, then? After all, it is in the Bible, and we are never free to tear out or ignore parts that we don’t like or don’t understand. What does Jesus mean when He says, “Judge not, and you will not be judged?” How does this not conflict with the other parts of Scripture?

A key part of understanding these words of Jesus is to understand what is meant here by “judge.” To judge is to be the one to make the decision, the call, and to do so based on our own ideas or reason.

This is seen if we consider the very next words of Jesus: “condemn not, and you will not be condemned.” You or I have no authority to condemn someone to hell. That belongs to God alone. He is the one who condemns at the Last Day. Likewise, He is the One who renders judgment. We don’t judge; God is the judge. He is the One who decides right and wrong, good and evil.

So where does that leave us? If we aren’t to render judgment, are we just supposed to say and do nothing? Well, no. As the examples of Scripture show us, we are still to speak on what is right and wrong, because that isn’t actually judgment.

Let me give you a worldly example. Let’s say you’re walking down the street, and you see someone park in a no-parking zone. If you go over to them and say, “Hey, you’re parked in a no-parking zone, and when the police come by they’ll give you a ticket,” are you judging? No, you’re not. You aren’t the one who established the parking zones or set the fines for breaking the ordinance. That’s all on someone else, someone who has the authority to do such things. You’re just passing on the decisions, the judgments, of those authorities.

This is what we Christians do when we speak God’s Word, especially His Word of Law, to the world. We aren’t the ones who establish right and wrong; that’s God’s role. But God has given us His Word in which He declares what He has judged to be right and wrong.

When we as God’s people speak out against the prevailing sins of our day, be they abortion or transgenderism or idolatry or whatever, we aren’t judging for ourselves, by our own reason, that such things are wrong. We are speaking that God has declared such things to be against His holy will, and that He will judge those who do such sins and refuse to repent and change their ways.

As we hear in 1 Corinthians 6, “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.” These aren’t St. Paul’s personal opinions. This is God the Holy Spirit speaking through him, declaring divine judgment against such sins and those who commit them. We speak, not in our own judgment, but as declaring the just judgments of God.

One of the criticisms leveled against Christians who speak God’s Word in such a way is that it’s “unloving.” We are told that we should have more compassion, more mercy. The thing is, that’s exactly why we speak! We heed the words of Jesus: “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”

God, in His mercy, didn’t leave us in our sins. He doesn’t look down from heaven and watch as we destroy ourselves and say to Himself, “Judge not.” No, in mercy He sent His Son, who died on the cross to pay the price for all our sins. And in still further mercy, He gives us His Word, both spoken and joined to water, that through it we might come to faith in Jesus, to believe that He truly is our Savior. And in even more mercy, He continues to sustain this saving faith by that Word, that we might endure through this life and be brought to Him in heaven forever.

He comes to us, who are blind in our sins, wandering aimlessly through the darkness of this life, and by His Word opens our eyes and shows us the truth that He alone saves from death and hell. As we sang in our opening hymn, “I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.”

We are in a world filled with people still blinded by sins. What, then, is the merciful thing to do? Let them continue to wander aimlessly on the path to destruction?

If you saw a blind person walking towards a busy intersection or an open manhole, would the merciful thing be to just let them go, to “judge not” and live and let live? No! You’d say something. You’d yell if he wasn’t close. You might even reach out and grab him, that he not get hit by a car or fall into the hole. That would be the loving, merciful thing to do.

Or to go back to the analogy of someone parking in a no-parking zone – if it’s someone you care for, someone you love, are you going to stay silent and let them get a ticket? Of course not! Such an action would be truly unloving. And as we’re called to love all people, we must warn everyone, even our enemies, not just those for whom we care.

After all, that is how the Father loves and shows mercy. He sent His Son to die for all people, not just those who loved Him first. If He’d done that, all humanity would be condemned, because as the Scriptures clearly teach, no one loves God on his own. As it is written, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

We are all born blind from sin. Our sinful nature is the great log jammed in our eye that totally obscures our vision. But our Savior came and died on a cross made from logs, cleansing us by His blood. He washes out our eyes in the waters of Holy Baptism that we might see correctly. And as we go through this life and little specks come into our eyes from all the filth flying through the air, we come again in

confession, which is really just a return to the font, and ask our Lord to again cleanse our eyes and let us see by the light of His Word.

It is having our eyes cleansed by God's Word that lets us gently, carefully, take specks out of the eyes of others. And again, we don't do this by using our human reason and feelings to guide us. That would be the blind leading the blind, or the blind operating on the blind.

No, we speak God's Word, we guide them to the font that Christ may wash clean their eyes and their hearts. We proclaim that we too were blind but now we see, and in love and mercy we want to bring others to Christ that He might open their eyes as He did for us.

As our Lord guides us to do this, He gives us great comfort, taking a burden off of us that we might think we have to bear. What burden would that be? The burden of being the judge! To judge rightly is a very weighty thing. You need to know all the facts. You need to know the whole story. You need to know the people involved. And you need to know what the consequences of your judgment will be.

Imagine us humans trying to make such judgments, especially in dealing with things that have eternal consequences, such as right and wrong. It would be an unbearable weight! That's why we aren't the judge; God is! He alone can and does bear that burden. We don't have to fully understand why He decrees something to be right or wrong in order for it to be right or wrong.

It depends on Him, not on us. He knows the all the facts – everything. He knows the whole story – the entirety of human history. He knows the people involved – the hearts of everyone are completely open books to Him. And as He is unbounded by time, He knows the consequences as they go into eternity, that His good and gracious will would be brought about.

He does teach us much about His will and why things are right or wrong in His Word, and we can use this knowledge in mercy to help when we speak to others. To go back to the parking zone analogy – you might know that the reason that particular spot is a no-parking zone is that it's right in front of a fire hydrant, and perhaps that knowledge will help you persuade the person to move. But at the end of the day, it's still a no-parking zone.

At the end of the day – indeed the end of days, the Last Day – God's Word will stand. His just decrees will be true forever. And so you can speak His Word in confidence, knowing that the Lord Himself will be the judge on the Last Day. On that Day, Satan and his lies will be completely exposed, and the Lord will be shown just and true in all His ways.

As we await that great and glorious Day, let us lead others to the One who has restored our sight, and let us do so in both humility and confidence. Our Lord has shown us incredible mercy and has opened our eyes to the truth, and He sends us forth to share that word of mercy and truth with others.

In the name of Jesus, amen.