

Why Can't I Judge?

September 13, 2026

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

Paul didn't want people to judge one another. In particular, he didn't want Christians to judge one another. He accurately foresaw that people who judge one another don't live together very well. In a new community of a new faith, that could be catastrophic, resulting in resentments, conflicts, and fractures.

It turns out another famous early leader had much the same notion, a once obscure laborer from a small Galilean village named, as you've no doubt deduced, Jesus of Nazareth. "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged," he said in the Sermon on Mount, found in the seventh chapter of Matthew. Paul's teachings echoed Jesus' teachings: The Church was supposed to be a non-judgmental community.

There's only one problem. It is basically impossible for human beings to live life without making judgments. Most of them don't have moral content – it doesn't really matter much what I choose for breakfast – but others do. People ask me to do things and I make a judgment about whether I will or not. People ask me to tell them things I make a judgment about whether I can or not. People give me directions or even requirements and, yes, I make a judgment about whether I will do those or not – and face the consequences.

I've made countless judgments about the content of Christian faith. I judged the basic assertions of Christianity about the existence and priorities of God, about the nature and work of Jesus Christ, about the strength and presence of the Holy Spirit – and, oh, yes, the triune nature of God. I judged them to be true. I believed them. It's a curious thing about Christianity that we're asked to make a judgment – to believe in and trust the beneficence of God – and the very next thing we're told is: "Do not judge."

It gets more ridiculous when I consider how judgment is indispensable to learning. Teachers choose what to teach (yes, I know, curriculum gets set by administrators and legislators, but bear with me here). People decide what children should know and when, in their development, they should come to know it. It's judgment that says children should learn to read. Plenty of places in the world choose not to teach some children to read. Famously, Malala Yousafzai was targeted for assassination for advocating education for girls and women in Pakistan when she was barely a teenager. She survived and her work survived. She remains the youngest person ever awarded the Nobel Peace Prize – which is also a judgment.

We learned things that others judged we should learn. We didn't learn things that others judged we should not learn. We learned things because others tested us to see what we knew and insisted we learn the things we hadn't because they judged we should.

Without judgment, there simply isn't learning.

So why can't I judge?

Audrey West writes at Working Preacher, "It is tough to praise God if you are busy passing judgment on other people. At least that is what the apostle Paul seems to be saying in this passage from Romans, in which he exhorts the community of house-churches in Rome to avoid fighting over non-essential matters."

Paul named two issues here. It's not entirely clear whether he knew that these were subjects of debate in the Roman church – remember, he'd never been there – or whether these were handy examples that came from his experience with churches he knew more about. The issue of eating meat or eating vegetables: In First Corinthians, Paul gave a full and detailed consideration of whether to eat things that had been offered to idols. This was apparently a common practice around the Mediterranean cultures within the Roman Empire. Animals sacrificed before idols became meat sold in the marketplaces – that says something about how scale of it all, doesn't it? If it was a concern in Corinth, it was probably a concern to other churches Paul worked with in Galatia, Ephesus, Thessalonica. It was probably a question in many churches, including Rome.

The other concern he mentioned was whether to observe "special days," which probably means religious festivals. Which ones? Well, in Galatians 4, Paul wrote, "Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental principles? How can you want to be enslaved to them again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted." (Galatians 4:8-11)

It sounds very much as if the Galatians Paul criticized – rather harshly and judgmentally, I have to say – were participating in pagan seasons and festivals.

There would have been a lot of pressure to do so, both internally – this is what they knew to do – and externally – "I know you're devoted to this Christ god now, but you can honor Demeter, too, because we really need a good harvest." In the first century Roman world, very few people limited their devotion to a single deity, and they didn't limit it to a single pantheon. The Egyptian goddess Isis had a temple in Rome next to the complex to which Roman citizens went to vote.

Some of the Galatians had succumbed to the pressure. So, too, I'm sure, did church members in Corinth and Phillipi and, of course, Rome.

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Paul asserted two things here: First, these practices involving food and festivals were not essential. It was an astonishing statement, given that devotional practice has been considered essential in nearly every religion in nearly every place. Paul was the person, however, who had concluded that if a law so old it preceded the Law of Moses – namely the requirement of circumcision for all males in the community of God – could be set aside if it became a barrier, a wall, a stumbling block for those who sought to enter that community.

Paul judged circumcision, food practices, and religious calendars to be non-essential. It was an astonishing thing to say, but he said it. You could eat, or not eat; you could celebrate, or not celebrate; you could circumcise or not circumcise; and either way you could do so out of devotion to God.

The second thing he said was, "It's not your judgment to make, anyway. It's up to God. That's who judges. Not you."

As Alyce McKenzie writes at her blog, "When we judge others we place our authority above God's. We are all only servants of God in God's household. We are to focus on God, not our supposed superiority to others. All conduct must take its reference from our service to Jesus whose claim to lordship over all comes from his death and resurrection. (Best, 156) We will not have to justify to God the conduct of others, but only our own."

Israel Kamudzandu writes at Working Preacher, "The question to be addressed in today's church is as follows: tolerance or love? Romans 14:1-12 is a call to introspection of individuals, groups, clergy, and faith pillars who have settled into a culture of tolerance instead of love, hospitality, and appreciation of others. The entire New Testament is about love, but many people operate with a mindset of tolerating others, rather than loving them."

When we judge people, we tolerate them. At best. At worst, well, let's not go there. When we love them, we may be disappointed by some of the things they do. I don't think we'll avoid that. Love's foundation is trust. I trust that you do this thing out of love. I trust you do this thing out of your best wishes. I trust that you do this thing because you believe it will make things better for all of us. I trust you.

You might be wrong – you may not know what you need to know to make the decision you made – but I will trust you did the best you could with what you knew at the time.

Love is founded on trust.

So why can't I judge? Because I can't judge you and love you. I just can't. I can love you and trust you. I can love you and ask, "Can we do this differently? Did you know this would happen? Had you heard what this other person had to say?" You can love me and ask, "What did you

think would happen when you did this? Is there a better way to approach such things in the future?"

You can love me and insist that I learn the multiplication table.

What you can't do is love me and decide that you're a better Christian than I am. I can't love you and act as if I'm the be-all and end-all of Christianity. That's not me. That's Jesus.

That's why I can't judge.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson