

A Brief Guide to Becoming a Less-Judgmental Christian

It is painful to feel judged. We experience judgmental acts as a violation of our character, our person. Perhaps we were misunderstood. Perhaps it was good advice with the wrong motivation. In any case, we feel attacked.

Yet, when we are the one who did the judging, usually we are unaware (or perhaps just barely aware). We just wanted to right a wrong, to improve a situation.

Whether we are aware of our judgmental behavior or not, the fact of the matter is that many people seem to perceive Christians as judgmental. And for that reason, they avoid faith. Perhaps it is time we learn how to be less judgmental Christians.

“Judge not, lest you be judged,” Jesus advises in Matthew 7:1. This is not just some “command to obey.” It is divine wisdom. The way we communicate with others will come back on us. Do you want to feel welcomed . . . or excluded? You can influence this by the way you communicate with others. But as we discovered above, it is hard to notice when we are being judgmental. Thus, learning how to be a less-judgmental Christian is all about paying attention.

1. We Pay Attention to Ourselves

One eager Christian asked Abba Poemen, a holy man, how he could be devoted to God. The master replied, “Say in every situation, “I, who am I?” and do not pass judgment on anybody.” “I, who am I?” This is the question to ask. Paul declares himself the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). Abba Moses carried a basket of sand, some dribbling out the holes, on his way to a council to condemn a brother. He arrived at the council declaring, “My sins are running out behind me—yet here I come today to pass judgment on another!” In order to become less judgmental toward others, we must have a clear mind about ourselves.

Jesus tells us that “out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). The task, then, is to observe what from our hearts is guiding our speech. This is not hard to do. We simply ask ourselves questions like the following as we review a day’s (or perhaps a week’s) interactions:

- Why did I speak the way I did?
- Do I sense insecurity, jealousy, envy, or other dangerous motives?
- Was it simply a matter of a standard that I was concerned about?
- What is in my heart as I speak?

It may take time to learn to notice what was present inside as we speak. But with a bit of practice, you’ll catch on. And it will get deeper the more you mature in this. These kinds of observations, combined with a growing clarity about our own strengths and weaknesses will build a strong self-awareness that is sure to have an impact on your communication with others.

2. We Pay Attention to Others

Judgmentalism is not simply (or even primarily) about how we see ourselves. It is how others perceive that we are viewing *them*. It is about others. Paul communicates this clearly in his comments to the Roman Christians, “Therefore stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister” (Romans 14:13). The goal is the loving care we offer to others for their growth in the Lord.

And so we pay attention. Each evening we review our interactions and think of the others we have met. We ask, (and as we grow we can learn to ask these *before* we speak):

- Who is this person? How did they get to be the way they are? (Understanding)

- Have I given them a chance to share their perspective?
- What kind of words or acts would benefit them the most in this situation?

There is a story in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* of a holy man who learned that a peer had an illicit relationship. The holy man offered a gift to the peer, who was conscience stricken and repented of his sin. There are times when our best ministry--to a woman caught in adultery, for example—might be a gesture of welcome. Our judging correctly in these matters (John 7:24) grows only as we learn to pay careful attention to others.

3. *We Pay Attention to God*

Ultimately, as Christians, our hope is to reflect the character of Christ to others, to communicate with them as God might communicate. Paul rebukes those who pass judgment on others, because in passing judgment they are “showing contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance, and patience” not realizing that “God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance” (Romans 2:3-4). There is another story in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* about someone who passed judgment against another’s lax religious performance and then had trouble himself keeping his own practices. An angel appeared to him and declared that “one who is able to restrain himself does not do it by virtue of his own strength: it is the grace of God that empowers the person.”

Ask yourself:

- “How has God shown grace to me?”
- “How does God interact with people like I encountered today?”

We learn the language of disciples in part by paying attention to our own speech. We learn even more by paying attention to how God speaks.

4. *We Pay Attention to Communication Itself*

At times perceptions of judgmentalism are simply a matter of miscommunication. Different cultures, different personalities communicate differently and sometimes we try to communicate one thing and others perceive another. The good news is that we can learn to notice even these slips. But in these cases it requires help. It requires a community that is willing to “speak the truth with love” (Ephesians 4:15). What we do here is give others permission to say to us:

- “Do you know that when you say (or gesture . . .) like *this*, we feel like *that*?”

That is all you need to do. By giving permission for others to point out to you how your communication affects them you open a door to mutuality. Remember, people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. You offer that care by opening yourself to learning how your communication actually communicates. Then you can “edit” your speaking and what you say will be ever more clear.

By regularly paying attention to ourselves, to others, to God, and by giving permission for others to help us pay attention to our communication itself, we can grow in love and truth, living a life worthy of the Lord and pleasing him in every way (Colossians 1:10).