

Charitable Judgments: An Antidote to Judging Others

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I Knew It!

“I knew he was too proud to take criticism,” thought Anne, “and now I have proof!”

On the previous Sunday, Anne had dropped a prayer card in the offering plate asking her pastor to stop in and pray with her when she went to the hospital for some minor surgery. When he failed to come by, she called the church secretary and learned that her pastor had already been to the hospital that day to see another church member.

“So he has no excuse!” she thought. “He was in the building and knew I needed his support, but still he ignored me. He’s resented me ever since I told him his sermons lack practical application. Now he’s getting back at me by ignoring my spiritual needs. And he calls himself a shepherd!”

After brooding over his rejection for three days, Anne sat down Saturday evening and wrote a letter confronting her pastor about his pride, defensiveness and hypocrisy. As she sealed the envelope, she could not help thinking about the conviction he would feel when he opened his mail.

The moment she walked into church the next morning, one of the deacons hurried over to her. “Anne, I need to apologize to you. When I took the prayer cards out of the offering plates last week, I accidentally left your card with some pledge cards. I didn’t notice my mistake until last night when I was totaling the pledges. I am so sorry I didn’t get your request to the pastor!” Before Anne could reply to the deacon, her pastor approached her with a warm smile. “Anne, I was thinking about your comment about practical application as I finished my sermon yesterday. I hope you notice the difference in today’s message.”

Anne was speechless. All she could think about was the letter she had just dropped in a mailbox three blocks from church.

Judging Is Necessary but Dangerous

As Anne discovered, judging others can put us in embarrassing situations. Does this mean that we should never judge others? Not at all. As you interact with other people you must constantly interpret, evaluate, and form opinions regarding their qualities, words, and actions, so that you may respond to them appropriately (see Prov. 8:12-21; 9:1-6; Matt. 10:16; 1 Cor. 2:11-16).

For example, when you buy something, you need to decide whether the seller is being honest about its quality and value. If someone disregards your advice, you need to interpret her actions so you can approach her more effectively. And when someone is nominated to a church office, the congregation needs to evaluate whether he is qualified to serve.

Although judging is a normal and necessary part of life, Scripture warns us that we have a natural tendency to judge others in a wrong way. For example, Jesus says:

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust

in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." (Matt. 7:1-6)

As this passage teaches, when we evaluate and judge other people, our natural inclination is to ignore our own faults and to make critical judgments of others. Jesus is not forbidding critical thinking in the positive sense, which is evaluating others' words and actions carefully so we can discriminate between truth and error, right and wrong (see Matt. 7:15-16).

What he is warning us about is our inclination to make critical judgments in the negative sense, which involves looking for others' faults and, without valid and sufficient reason, forming unfavorable opinions of their qualities, words, actions, or motives. In simple terms, it means looking for the worst in others.

Critical Judgments Come Naturally

When Adam sinned, he corrupted the entire human race. He passed on to each of us an inherent tendency to sin, which includes a natural inclination towards mistaken, negative judgments.[1] This inclination is revealed throughout the Bible. The Old Testament offers many examples:

- After the Israelites conquered the promised land, the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh returned to their allotted land and built an altar by the Jordan. When the other tribes heard about the altar, they assumed the worst and rashly assembled their troops to go to war against their brothers. Fortunately, before a battle began, those who had built the altar were able to explain its legitimate purpose and avoid bloodshed. (Joshua 22:10-34)
- In 1 Samuel, we read how the high priest made a hasty, critical judgment. When Eli saw Hannah praying in the temple, moving her lips but making no sound, he concluded that she was drunk. Only after harshly confronting her did he learn that she was communing with the Lord in a way that put Eli to shame. (1:12-17)
- Even King David made critical judgments. When he fled from his son Absalom, a man named Ziba brought David a critical report regarding Saul's son, Mephibosheth, saying that he had turned against King David. Without waiting to hear Mephibosheth's side of the story, David passed judgment against this innocent man and turned all of his property over to a false witness. (2 Sam. 16:1-4; 19:24-30)

The New Testament also portrays this pattern of making critical judgments.

- When Jesus was doing miracles and healing the blind, the Pharisees stubbornly closed their eyes to the good he was doing and interpreted his actions in the worst possible way, saying that he was actually serving the devil. (Matt. 12:22-24)
- In Acts 21:26-29, we see that Paul meticulously followed all of the Jewish customs as he prepared to come into the temple. Even so, the Jews assumed the worst, jumping to the conclusion that he had defiled the temple and should be stoned.

- As 1 Corinthians 10-11 reveals, the Apostle Paul repeatedly was condemned falsely, not only by the Jews, but also by people from within the Christian community. Like many church leaders today, he learned the hard lesson that servants of the Lord are often misunderstood, criticized, and judged by the very people they are trying to serve.

But we don't need to look back thousands of years to see people making critical judgments of others. Just think how easily we ourselves believe the worst about others' motives or actions.

- If someone delays answering a letter or fulfilling a commitment, we assume too easily that he is avoiding us or evading his responsibilities. Could it be that he's been in the hospital recovering from a serious accident? Could he be overwhelmed by other responsibilities?
- If our children do not complete their chores on time, we conclude that they are being disobedient. Could it be that they are secretly wrapping a special present for their mom's birthday? Could they have gotten distracted, and a simple reminder would help?
- If an employer fails to give us a raise, we assume she is unappreciative or greedy. Could she be struggling to keep the business going in the face of increasing competition and operating costs?
- If someone at church seems unfriendly, we assume she is proud or aloof. Could it be that she feels awkward and unsure of herself, and is hoping someone will reach out to her?
- If the elders do not accept a proposal we make, we may conclude that they are narrow-minded and do not understand or appreciate our opinions or needs. Could it be that God is leading them to give priority to a different ministry?
- If church members raise questions about policies or new programs, church leaders may conclude that the members are stubbornly unwilling to consider new ideas or stretch themselves to grow. They may even be labeled as rebellious troublemakers. Could it be that they have legitimate insights and concerns that deserve a careful hearing?

Judge Charitably

Instead of judging others critically, God commands us to judge charitably. The church has historically used the word "charitable" as a synonym for the word "loving." This has resulted in the expression, "charitable judgments." Making a charitable judgment means that out of love for God, you strive to believe the best about others until you have facts to prove otherwise. In other words, if you can reasonably interpret facts in two possible ways, God calls you to embrace the positive interpretation over the negative, or at least to postpone making any judgment at all until you can acquire conclusive facts.

For example, when Anne's pastor did not visit her in the hospital, she should have realized that there were at least two possible explanations. One explanation was that he was deliberately slighting her. Another was that he had not received her note or had some other valid reason for not visiting her. If she had developed the habit of making charitable judgments, she would have believed the positive explanation until she received facts that showed otherwise.

Believing the best about others is not simply a nice thing to do; it is not optional behavior. It is a way to imitate God and to show our appreciation for how he treats us. God knows everything and

judges accurately. He has the final say in criticism (and in commendation). Yet he judges charitably, even mercifully, passing over and putting up with many wrongs. He is kind to ungrateful and evil people (Luke 6:35).

Charitable judgments are also an act of obedience to God. As we saw in Matthew 7:1-6, Jesus himself forbids us to judge others until we have done two things. First, we must take responsibility for any contribution we may have made to a problem. Second, we must make a diligent effort to “see clearly,” that is, to accurately understand what someone else has done and why he or she did it. Therefore, whenever we gloss over our own faults, assume facts, speculate on motives, or jump to conclusions about others, we have disobeyed our Lord.

Charitable judgments are also required by Jesus’ command in Matthew 7:12, where he sets forth the Golden Rule. “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” How do you want others to judge you? Do you want them to believe good about you instead of evil? To interpret your actions in the best possible way? To really try to understand your side of the story before drawing conclusions or talking to others about you? If so, Jesus commands that you do the same for others.

Our responsibility to judge others charitably is reinforced by Jesus’ teaching on the second great commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39). Just think of how quickly we judge ourselves favorably! When we are questioned or criticized, our natural response is to explain our actions in the best possible light and make excuses for any perceived wrong. If this is how we are inclined to love ourselves, it is also the way we should love others.

Charitable judgments are also implicit in the Apostle Paul’s teaching on love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Pay special attention to the last sentence: Paul teaches that love “always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” In other words, love always looks for reasonable ways to trust others, to hope that they are doing what is right, and to interpret their words and actions in a way that protects their reputation and credibility. This is the essence of charitable judgments.

Notice that I said we should look for “reasonable ways” to believe the best about others. We are not called to suspend critical thinking in the positive sense or to make judgments that are contrary to clear facts. If we hear someone say something that is patently false or vicious, we can conclude that it is wrong and legitimately confront the speaker. But if we only hear second-hand information or observe an act that could be interpreted in different ways, God calls us to withhold judgment and look for a reasonable explanation.

The call to judge others charitably is not something new or novel. It finds its roots in the Ten Commandments and is consistent with hundreds of years of church doctrine. In Exodus 20:16 God says, “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.” The church has historically interpreted this commandment not only to forbid lying but also to require charitable judgments.

Luther's Small Catechism teaches that this commandment means, "We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way." [2]

Similarly, the Westminster Larger Catechism teaches that this commandment requires "preserving and promoting truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor, . . . a charitable esteem of our neighbors; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for and covering of their infirmities; freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces, defending their innocence; a ready receiving of a good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them . . ." [3]

Jonathan Edwards, one of America's greatest theologians, thoroughly discussed God's call for charitable judgments in his superb book, *Charity and Its Fruits*.^[4] Drawing on the passages discussed above (Matt. 7 and 1 Cor. 13), he shows that the Bible condemns censoriousness, which he defines as "a disposition to think evil of others, or to judge evil in them," and commends charitable judgments, which he describes as "a disposition to think the best of others that the case will allow."^[5]

The phrase "charitable judgments" may sound new to many of us today, but the concept itself is rooted deeply in the Word of God and the teaching of the church. Therefore, it should be rooted deeply in our hearts and displayed in our lives.

There Are Limits to Charitable Judgments

Like all principles taught in Scripture, the call to make charitable judgments does not stand against reason. It does not operate apart from other biblical commands to notice and confront wrongdoing, to protect the weak, and to promote righteousness and justice. In other words, Scripture itself teaches that there are limits to making charitable judgments.

First, God's command to be charitable does not require us to believe that an action is good when there is significant evidence to the contrary. Although we should always give people the benefit of the doubt, we should not ignore clear indications that things are not as they should be. In fact, excessive charity can lead to denial and blind us to issues that need to be faced. Ignoring these symptoms only delays dealing with a problem in its early stages. This can lead to disastrous results, as David discovered when he ignored indications that Absalom was turning the people of Israel against the king (see 2 Sam. 15:1-6).

Therefore, if you see signs of a significant problem, it is appropriate to investigate the matter, ask questions, gather reliable information, and draw necessary conclusions (Prov. 18:17). If it appears that someone has done something wrong, and if that wrong is too serious to overlook (Prov. 19:11), you should go to that person and find out whether you are assessing the situation accurately (Matt. 18:15; Luke 17:3). As you approach him, you should speak tentatively instead of conclusively. For example, instead of saying, "You lied about why I was not at the meeting last night," you might say, "Perhaps I misunderstood what you said, but it sounded like you accused me of deliberately missing the meeting last night."

As you talk with the other person, you should give every opportunity for a reasonable explanation. If you did misunderstand the situation, you will have avoided needless offense. Conversely, if your concerns prove to be legitimate, God can use your loving confrontation to help the person face up to and overcome harmful actions (Gal. 6:1-2; James 5:19-20).

Second, charity does not require that we accept without question everything people tell us. Nor does it require that we naively entrust ourselves to people who do not have legitimate authority or have not proven themselves to be worthy of our trust. Since we live in a fallen world, charity must always walk hand-in-hand with discernment and wisdom (Phil. 1:9-10; James 3:14-17).

Third, the call for charitable judgments should not be used to stifle appropriate discussion, questioning, and debate. If people have sincere concerns about a matter, they should not be brushed aside with, “Just trust us.” Instead, their concerns should be reasonably explored, and a genuine effort should be made to find a just and mutually agreeable solution (1 Pet. 5:2-3). At the same time, once a matter has been examined and those in authority have reached a biblically valid decision, others should respect that decision and trust that God will work through it, even if it is not the course they would have preferred (Heb. 13:17).

Finally, charity does not prevent the exercise of redemptive church discipline. When the leaders of a church believe a member is caught in a sin, they have a responsibility to seek after him, like shepherds looking for a straying sheep (Matt. 18:12-14; Gal. 6:1). If he will not repent, the church should continue to confront him lovingly and bring to bear whatever biblical discipline is necessary to help him see the seriousness of his sin and be restored to the Lord (Matt. 18:15-20).

Even these limitations on charitable judgments are to be guided by love. Whether we are believing the best about others, or discussing problems between us, our goal should always be the same: to treat them with the same charitable concern that God always shows to us.

Three Judgments to Avoid

As we seek to obey God’s command to make charitable judgments, we should become alert to three ways that we judge critically. First, we think negatively of the qualities of others. When we develop a critical attitude toward others, we start a subtle but steady process of selective data gathering. We easily overlook or minimize others’ good qualities, while at the same time we search for and magnify any unfavorable qualities. As we find faults that reinforce opinions we have already formed, we seize them eagerly, saying to ourselves (and sometimes others), “See, I told you so!” One critical judgment looks for and feeds on another, and the person’s character is steadily diminished and ultimately destroyed in our minds.

The second way we judge others wrongly is to think the worst of their words and actions. We hear rumors of conversations or observe fragments of an opponent’s behavior. Instead of searching for a favorable interpretation of their actions, or giving them a chance to explain what happened (Prov. 18:13), we prefer to put the worst construction on what they have done. We overlook things that are in the person’s favor and focus on the things that seem to be against him. To top it off, we fill in the gaps with assumptions and finally judge the person to have done wrong.

One day a small church was expecting a guest preacher. He arrived early and sat in his car writing additional thoughts in his notes. He periodically put his short, white pencil in his mouth so he could free a hand to turn to a verse in his Bible. A deacon pulled in beside him, watched him for a moment, and then went inside. When the guest preacher walked into the church a few minutes later, he sensed antagonism from the entire group of deacons. He asked if he had done something wrong. The head deacon replied, “We find it very offensive that you would sit in our church parking lot smoking a cigarette, especially when you were about to preach God’s Word from our pulpit!” You can imagine the deacons’ embarrassment when the man pulled the pencil from his pocket and explained that he had only been working on his sermon.

The third and most insidious type of critical judgment is to assume the worst about others’ motives. Some people are habitually cynical (distrustful or suspicious of others’ nature or motives); others assume the worst only in certain people. In either case, the effect is the same: they are quick to attribute others’ actions to an unworthy motive, such as pride, greed, selfishness, control, rebellion, stubbornness, or favoritism.

When doing this, they think or say things like, “All he cares about is money.” “She likes to go first so she can impress everyone.” “They are too proud to listen to advice.” “What he really wants is to force us out of the group.” “She is just too stubborn to admit she is wrong.” Although these appraisals may be true on some occasions, in many cases they will be false.

So, is there ever a time that we can properly form a firm opinion about someone’s motives? Yes, we may do so whenever the other person expressly admits to such motives, or when there is a pattern of incontrovertible facts that can lead to no other reasonable conclusion.

But when such clear proof is not present, it is wrong to presume we can look into others’ hearts and judge the motives for their actions. Scripture teaches that God alone can see into the heart and discern a person’s motives (see 1 Sam. 16:7; Ps. 44:21; Prov. 16:2). When we believe that we also are able to do this, we are guilty of sinful presumption.

All three types of critical judgments violate God’s will. Scripture sternly warns against those who indulge evil suspicions against their brothers and fail to give them a chance to explain themselves (1 Tim. 6:4; Ps. 15:3, 50:19-20). Our sin is compounded if we develop the habit of receiving or circulating evil reports about others (2 Cor. 12:20; Eph. 4:31). Jonathan Edwards likens our believing and spreading a critical judgment to “feeding on it, as carrion birds do on the worst of flesh.” [6] That is what we are doing when we receive and circulate bad reports about others: it is like passing around rotting flesh.

These kinds of critical judgments also violate God’s command in James 4:11-12:

Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

The answer to James’s question is obvious. *When we set ourselves up to judge critically the qualities, words, actions, or motives of others, we are doing nothing less than playing God.* Just

think how such behavior grieves our Lord! When we judge others in this way, we are imitating and serving the enemy of our souls. Satan is the master accuser, the father of lies, and the presumptuous judge of the saints (John 8:44; Rev. 12:10). We should be loath to do anything that imitates his ways or advances his schemes.

Critical Judgments Are Destructive and Costly

Critical judgments can do great damage to relationships and to the kingdom of God. If you assume the worst about others, you will often misjudge them and jump to conclusions. This can cause deep hurt, bring you great embarrassment, and eventually destroy relationships. A critical attitude also leads us to exaggerate others' wrongs and overlook their virtues, which distorts reality. This perspective will increasingly rob you of objectivity and often lead to decisions you later regret.

Critical judgments can also be highly contagious. Our comments influence the attitudes of those around us. Furthermore, people usually treat us as we treat them, so when we judge others harshly, it is only a matter of time before they do the same with us. Soon we are "biting and devouring each other" (Gal. 5:15).

This behavior grieves the Holy Spirit and inhibits his work in us (Eph. 4:30-32; Isa. 59:1-2). Like spiritual cholesterol in the arteries of our soul, it slows the flow of grace and can eventually lead to "heart attacks" that leave us spiritually crippled and our relationships in ruins.

Critical judgments can even cripple a church. As we individual Christians judge one another critically, we undermine the unity of the church, sap its spiritual resources, and diminish its credibility and evangelistic witness to those who are watching how we treat one another (John 13:34-35).

If you critically judge others even occasionally, you will experience many of these effects. It will be far worse if you develop a habit or disposition to judge others critically. Scripture warns us that the longer a person indulges in negative attitudes toward others, the more habitual these attitudes become. As Psalm 109:18-19 teaches, "He wore cursing as his garment; it entered into his body like water, into his bones like oil. May it be like a cloak wrapped about him, like a belt tied forever around him" (see also Prov. 11:27; 2 Tim. 2:16). What a dreadful judgment! If you do not flee from the habit of being uncharitable, this attitude will enslave you more and more and do increasing harm to those around you.

Getting to the Root of Critical Judgments

A key step in breaking free from the habit of making critical judgments is to trace them to their source and cut them off at the root. To do this you must deal with your heart. James 4:1-12 describes two of the most common sources of critical judgments. The first is selfishness. When others stand in the way of what we want, we strive to remove their opposition by tearing them down and diminishing their credibility and influence in any way we can (vv. 1-3).

Pride is another source of critical judgments. Thinking that we are better than others, we set ourselves up as their judges and begin to catalog their failings and condemn their actions. As we saw earlier, when we do this we are imitating Satan by trying to play God (vv. 7, 12). Pride can

also reveal itself in the inclination to believe that “I alone understand the truth about things.” I think that my beliefs, convictions, theology, and doctrines are true, and I look down on anyone who disagrees with me (cf. Gal. 5:26).

Matthew 7:3-5 shows that self-righteousness is another root of critical judgments. When we have done something wrong but we do not want to admit it, one of the most natural things we do is to draw attention to and even magnify the failures of others.

Insecurity, which is a form of the fear of man, is a related root of this problem. When we lack confidence in our own beliefs and positions, and fear that they might be disproved, we often conclude that the best defense is a good offense. Therefore, we attack others’ views and judge them before they can judge us.

Jealousy can also lead to critical judgments. As we see in Genesis 37:11, Joseph’s brothers were jealous of his close relationship with God and his father, and they

repeatedly interpreted his motives and actions in the worst possible way. As their jealousy grew, it culminated in their selling him into slavery.

Another cause is **self-pity**. On occasion, many of us find a perverse pleasure in feeling sorry for ourselves. Therefore, we tend to interpret situations in a way that hurts us the most. One of the best ways to do this is to interpret others’ actions as a form of betrayal.

Prejudice is frequently a cause of critical judgments. When we have preconceived, unfavorable opinions about others simply because of their race, religion, gender, or status in life, we will consistently seek to validate our views by interpreting their beliefs and actions negatively.

Unforgiveness can also lead us to look for the worst in others. If someone has hurt us, and we do not forgive him, we will look for ways to justify our unforgiveness. Finding more faults in the person who hurt us is a convenient way to conceal the hardness of our own heart.

Of course, the ultimate source of critical judgments is a **lack of love**. **Where love is deficient, critical judgments** will be the norm. Conversely, where love abounds, charitable judgments should abound (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

Think for a moment of the wide spectrum of love you have for different people. There are probably some people in your life whom you love greatly. Usually these people have blessed you in some way. You appreciate and respect them so much that when others criticize them, you automatically think or say, “Oh, that could not be true!” No matter what they are accused of, you instinctively believe that there must be a good explanation for what they have done.

At the other end of the spectrum are people whom you love very little. They may have disappointed you, disagreed with you, hurt you, or blocked something you desired. If you are like most people, you are quick to find fault with them. You grab onto critical reports like Velcro and dismiss favorable reports like Teflon. No matter what these people do, it is difficult for you to acknowledge good in them.

What is it that separates these people in our hearts and minds? What is it that places them on the opposite ends of our rating system? Sometimes the difference arises from fundamental differences in their characters. Some people are simply more virtuous and likeable than others. But in many cases the difference is found not in these other people, but in our attitudes towards them. If someone has not benefited me, agreed with me, supported me, fulfilled me, satisfied me, or otherwise demonstrated love for me, I am not inclined to love him—or to judge him charitably.

Unless God does major surgery in our hearts, these attitudes will continue to control our judgments and destroy our relationships. The good news is that God is ready to operate.

God Is Eager to Help Us Change

Jesus Christ came to earth to deliver us from our sins, and judgmentalism is a prime sin. By dying on the cross, he purchased forgiveness and eternal life for all who believe in him (John 3:16, 6:47; 1 Pet. 3:18; 1 John 4:15). Therefore, the first step in being delivered from this sin is to confess that you are a sinner who commits this sin. Believe that Jesus bore the punishment you deserve. Trust that his resurrection secured forgiveness and eternal life for you. Thank him for judging you with mercy rather than fairness.

Jesus does even more. He will deliver you from the sinful thoughts and behavior that plague your life and damage your relationships today (Phil. 1:6). This process is called “sanctification.” It is carried out by the Holy Spirit, who works in you daily to change your heart steadily. He will help you to change your thinking, develop attitudes and habits that are pleasing to God, and make you a blessing to those around you (Phil. 2:12-13; 2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 4:19, 5:22-26). He personally teaches us to form and express charitable judgments.

Sanctification is primarily a work of the Holy Spirit within you. It also involves your full and active cooperation. In order to grow, draw on God’s grace. Strive earnestly to “put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires, to be made new in the attitude of your mind, and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:22-24).

This “put off, put on” process provides the road to freedom from making critical judgments. You can begin to put off this habit by confessing your tendency to look for the worst in others and asking God to forgive you for dishonoring him, hurting other people, and weakening the witness of his church. Then you can take hold of the wonderful promise: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

The next step in this process is to prayerfully identify and confess the particular attitudes that feed your critical spirit. As we saw earlier, these may include selfishness, pride, self-righteousness, insecurity, jealousy, self-pity, prejudice, unforgiveness, or a lack of love. Jesus’ death on the cross provides the key to putting off these sinful attitudes. When you unite yourself to Jesus through faith, he enables you to put your sinful desires to death. He also gives you power to put on the attitudes and character of Christ (Rom. 6:1-14; Col. 3:12-14).

This replacement process can be applied to each sinful attitude that leads you to judge wrongly. For example, as you ask God to help you put your pride to death, focus on and ask God to give

you the humility of Jesus (Phil. 2:1-11). In the same way, ask him to help you replace self-righteousness with a greater dependence on Christ's righteousness (Rom. 1:17), insecurity with godly confidence (Phil. 4:13), self-pity with contentment (Phil. 4:12), prejudice with open-mindedness (Acts 10:27-28), unforgiveness with forgiveness (Eph. 4:32), and a lack of love with a love for others, regardless of how they treat you (Luke 23:34).

Finally, ask God specifically to help you put on the habit of charitable judging. "Father, help me to acknowledge others' virtues, delight in their successes, overlook their faults, defend their reputation, seek to understand their perspective, and believe the best about them until I have facts to prove otherwise. Help me to deal honestly, humbly, and constructively with others' true failings." As you draw on his grace and use the normal interactions of daily life to practice making charitable judgments, these attitudes and habits can become more consistent with and characteristic of the person you are becoming.

In some situations you will also need to seek forgiveness from the people whom you have misjudged. If your critical judgments have led you to treat them disrespectfully or to speak critically about them to others, you should go to them, confess your sin, and ask for their forgiveness (Prov. 28:13). True repentance will be revealed if you also go to those who heard your judgments and seek to set the record straight with them.

Another way to demonstrate repentance is to break the cycle of spreading critical reports. If someone comes to you and begins to speak critically about another person, you can promptly interrupt her and say, "Have you talked to the other person about this?" If she says no, you can respond, "Then it's not right for you to be talking about him to me or anyone else. Jesus says you should go and talk to him in private, and if that doesn't work, you can ask another believer to meet with you both to try to resolve

the problem" (see Matt. 18:15-20).

Similarly, if someone speaks critically of another person or group for no constructive purpose, you can say what a friend once said to me. "I'm also concerned about what they are doing. But talking about it won't do any good. Could we pray for them right now?"

As you strive to break free from the habit of making critical judgments, it is helpful to make yourself accountable to godly people who observe your life on a daily basis. Ask them to pray for you in this area and to come talk with you when it seems you are sliding back into old habits. As these people spur you on in your growth, some of them may even be inspired to follow your example and develop the habit of making charitable judgments themselves.

What about People Who Did Wrong in the Past?

When people have undeniably done something wrong in the past, it is difficult not to jump to the conclusion that they are doing the same thing all over again. So how can we judge them charitably? In some cases, we may be able to talk with them about their past conduct and receive assurance that they really do want to change. But such conversations are not always possible, and even when they are, we may still doubt their sincerity. What then?

Whenever we deal with someone who has done wrong in the past, we should realize that the foundation for charitable judgments is not a perfect track record, worldly optimism, or a blind hope in the fleeting goodness of man. *Charitable judgments are rooted in the goodness and power of God*, who promises to work graciously and unceasingly to bless his people and conform them to the likeness of his Son (Rom. 8:28-39). As Paul writes, “It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Phil. 2:13). Because this is true, we can and should expect to see increasing evidences of his grace in our own lives and the lives of others.

As we embrace this truth, we can live our lives with “expectant charity.” We can hope for the best in others and expect that we will eventually see God doing something good in them. But this is not to be a demanding expectation, one that has a predetermined pace and pattern. Rather it is to be a gentle expectation, one that patiently and hopefully waits for the next divinely scheduled evidence of God’s work in that person’s life.

For example, even though my children have repeatedly fallen short of my desires and instructions, God calls me to believe that he will be faithful to his promise to conform them steadily to the likeness of Christ. He gives me frequent opportunities to trust him in this. I recently noticed my daughter, Megan, doing something that could reasonably have been interpreted in two possible ways: as being a repeat of an old pattern (not clearing the dinner table promptly), or as being a loving act (leaving the dishes for a few minutes for a good reason). Faith in God’s transforming promises enabled me to withhold my critical judgment and hope for the best. Moments later I discovered that Megan had been helping her grandmother get something out of her closet. How grateful I was that I had not jumped to a critical conclusion when my daughter was doing an act of love.

We have a powerful motivation for making charitable judgments—even of those who have done wrong in the past. It is the desire to honor God by imitating his mercy and kindness towards us (Eph. 5:1; Luke 6:36). Because of our past sins, God has every right to judge us with lethal and eternal criticism. Yet he is merciful, kind, patient, and gracious. He does not treat us as our sins deserve, and he always looks for the best in us (Ps. 130:3). If that is how he treats us, we should be eager to honor him by doing the same with others (see also Rom. 12:9; Col. 3:12-13; 1 Pet. 4:8).

So, if you struggle with a critical spirit, remember the goodness of God and his power to change people. Cultivate a desire to bring him praise by imitating his mercy and kindness to you. As you do so, you will find it increasingly natural to release people from their previous wrongs and judge their behavior today with the charity of Christ.

A Living Example

Carl is a living example of a man who has cultivated the habit of making charitable judgments. Although he is a long-time friend and we agree on most things, we have occasionally disagreed on significant issues. Yet, I have always felt completely free to speak frankly about my opinions, even when it is apparent that Carl holds a very different view. Why? I think it is because I have never once felt judged or condemned by Carl. Even when he thinks I hold a wrong view or am guilty of

sin, he has never said a word, used a tone of voice, or given me a look that indicates he condemns me or thinks less of me.

On the contrary, I always feel that he makes an earnest effort to understand my views, to find any legitimacy in them, and to re-examine his own beliefs in the light of our disagreement. Even when he has confronted me about my sin, I have felt a pervading sense of love and encouragement, not condemnation. And more than once I have heard that he gave me the benefit of the doubt when others spoke ill of me. Nor does he limit his charity to me. Even when I judge or speak critically of others to Carl, he refuses to play the game, even if that person has made his life difficult.

Carl treats others with a remarkable uniformity. Whether people treat him well or poorly, whether they agree with him or not, whether they advance his goals or block them, he has a habit of believing the best about them and resisting the temptation to find fault in them. Instead of breathing judgment, like some people I know, Carl continually breathes grace. As a result, people are drawn to him. They feel safe sharing their opinions, questions, and weaknesses around him, without fear of being judged. As Carl looks for the best in people, many of them (including me) are inspired to live up to his charitable opinion of them. As a result, the more time people spend with him, the more they grow in faith and character.

By God's grace, Carl is imitating the charitable attitude of our Lord Jesus Christ. When Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, she was drawn to him (John 4). Although she was guilty of great sin, she felt safe in his presence and did not fear condemnation. Jesus looked for the best in her, and she was inspired to change. As a result, she brought glory to God.

This is the effect I would like to have on people around me. I'm sure you would, also. If God can enable Carl to imitate Jesus by making charitable judgments, he can do it for us. Starting today, let's ask him to inspire us and enable us always to believe the best about others until we have facts to prove otherwise.

Help Me to Judge Rightly

Lord, help me to judge others as I want them to judge me: Charitably, not critically, Privately, not publicly, Gently, not harshly, In humility, not pride.

Help me to believe the best about others, until facts prove otherwise— To seek all sides of the story, And to judge no one until I've removed the log from my own eye.

May I never bring only the Law, to find fault and condemn.

Help me always to bring the Gospel,
to give hope and deliverance,
As you, my Judge and Friend,
have so graciously done for me.

[1] In fact, we also have a tendency to make mistaken positive assessments! We can be impressed by things we ought to criticize (2 Timothy 4:3, 2 Corinthians 11:4, Galatians 1:6-9, I Samuel 16:6f., Proverbs 7, etc.).

[2] Luther's Small Catechism, Question 61.

[3] Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 145.

[4] Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits: Christian Love as Manifested in the Heart and Life* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1962; reprint of 1852 edition).

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 205, 204.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 209.

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