DO NOT JUDGE

MERCY AS THE FOUNDATION OF LIFE WITH GOD

LUKE 6: 37 - MATTHEW 7 AND 18

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Introduction

Throughout the centuries, the question of whether a person may judge has been frequently discussed within the Christian community. This topic also regularly comes up during Sabbath school lessons. Often, the conversation seems to arrive at a clear but largely unsatisfactory answer: "*No, judging is not allowed*". Nevertheless, an important follow-up question arises: how should we deal with concrete situations in which we encounter the actions of others? Are we truly not allowed to have any judgment about that?

My goal in this treatise is to shift the question "*may I judge*?" to a deeper and more human level. Not the rule is central, but two fundamental questions: what gives direction to human life, and how do we relate to others? My starting point is that "*not judging*" is not a strict ethical prohibition but a path of inner transformation. What happens in a person's heart when they judge, and what changes when they release that judgment? It is an attitude that does not stem from an inner obligation but finds its origin in the biblical tradition itself: in the Torah, the Prophets, and the Wisdom Literaturen [A].

The realization that Jesus was a Jew and consistently supported his preaching with references to the Torah (the Law) and the Prophets invites us to approach the posed questions from those same scriptures. From that starting point, I have consciously chosen - as explained in previous treatises - not to rely on secondary literature on this topic. My intention is not to be guided by traditions and dogmatic teachings that have been repeatedly distorted over the centuries. A second reason I do not draw on external literature is that I do not want to be a copyist. The often mutually contradictory positions in these works have precisely prompted me to examine my own thinking, independent of these sources [1]. Therefore, I base my approach solely on the texts to which Jesus himself referred: the Torah and the Prophets. It can be an impetus for the reader to seek the answers to their questions in the Scripture. In this way, what I would call self-righteous answers are avoided: answers that fit a human thought pattern instead of what God conveys in his teachings.

"Do Not Judge" as a Divine Guideline

In Luke 6: 37, Jesus says: "*Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven*". These words connect to a rich tradition from biblical wisdom and prophetic literature, in which judging is not only a moral act but also one that affects the social and religious relationships within a community. In the first-century culture, where honor and

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[A] For Bible quotations and text references, I consistently use the King James Version (KJV), unless otherwise indicated. To keep the main text readable, topics requiring deeper explanation are elaborated in separate, detailed addenda. .

shame played a major role, "*judging*" often meant: determining someone's status, confirming or taking away their honor. Therefore, Jesus' call is not simply life advice but a profound guideline that harks back to the Torah and the Prophets: true justice begins with a pure heart and the right disposition (Leviticus 19: 17 - 8).

We also find this message in Matthew 7: 1 - 5, where Jesus speaks about the speck and the beam. Whoever criticizes another for a small fault often does not see their own great shortcoming. This image - typical of the prophetic and rabbinic tradition - shows that judging often says more about ourselves than about the other. Sometimes we not only project our own flaws onto others, but we (con)demn them precisely because they do not have the same faults or weaknesses as we do. Their different way of failing can be an unconscious confrontation with our own deep-rooted sins - sins we prefer not to face. What distinguishes them from us then functions as a mirror that confronts us with ourselves, and our judgment is then a defensive reaction to avoid that mirror.

Both evangelists emphasize that human judgment is often a mistake: we see our fellow human being through the lens of our own imperfections.

In his "*Sermon on the Plain*" (Luke 6), Luke particularly emphasizes the social consequences of judging. His statement, "*with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again*", refers to Old Testament texts that reject double standards as something contrary to God's justice (cf. among others Leviticus 19: 15, Deuteronomy 1: 17).

Matthew places the theme in a broader discussion about the perfect justice that characterizes the Kingdom of God, while Luke connects it with mercy and the formation of a community of disciples [2]. Both gospels share the same core: judging from self-righteousness stands diametrically opposed to God's grace.

Luke's "*Sermon on the Plain*" is not a break with the Old Testament but a radical deepening and completion of its deepest ethical principle: the call for an undivided, sustainable justice that arises from a sincere heart (Proverbs 20: 22; Micah 6: 8; Sirach 18: 20 - 23) [3].

Jesus shows that judging others often stems from applying our own, subjective standards. This is not only a moral error but a fundamental human problem: we make ourselves the measure for what is right or wrong. Annoyance at another's behavior is rarely purely objective; it often has to do with our inability to deal with differences. The other's behavior confronts us with our own vulnerability or shortcomings. Matthew makes this visible with the contrast between beam and mote; Luke connects it with mercy and forgiveness.

Biblical Wisdom and Inner Blindness

In biblical Wisdom Literature, a judgmental attitude is seen as a form of inner blindness. In the book of Proverbs, the warning is repeatedly sounded that a person tends to consider their own way as right: "Every way of a man is right in his own eyes: but the LORD pondereth the hearts" (Proverbs 21: 2; cf. 14: 12). Whoever quickly judges another thereby often loses sight of their own inner struggle.

This thought is further developed in the book of Jesus Sirach. There, true wisdom is connected to self-examination and receptivity: "*He that knoweth himself knoweth also his own weakness*" (cf.

Sirach 18: 30 - 31; 20: 5). Without this inner attention, the heart hardens and the person loses the ability to truly listen.

In later rabbinic tradition, this was referred to as the "*unexamined heart*": a heart that cannot hear because it listens mainly to itself, wanting to justify itself (Talmud Berakhoth 61A). Already in the prophets, we find the warning against the hardened, inscrutable heart. Jeremiah describes it as "*deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked*" (Jeremiah 17: 9) and Zechariah sees how people make their hearts "*as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law*" (Zecharia 7: 12). This is the heart that can no longer hear because it listens mainly to itself and wants to justify itself. Against this background, Jesus' call not to judge receives its full meaning in the Sermon on the Mount itself. When He speaks of the beam in one's own eye and the mote in another's eye, He does not call for moral indifference. He calls for wisdom - wisdom that begins with self-knowledge - which creates space for God's justice, without it being clouded by human defense mechanisms (Matthew 7: 1 - 5; cf. Luke 6: 41 - 42).

From Self-Justification to Divine Justice

This distinction is essential: our "*justice*" is often an instrument of demarcation, self-protection, and punishment. God's justice, on the other hand, is fundamentally aimed at restoration, at bringing what is broken back into the right relationship. It is a setting-right that connects truth and grace (Psalm 85: 11). Self-knowledge prevents us from obstructing this divine work with our own aspirations and objectives.

This mechanism of replacing God's Word and perspective with one's own insight finds its archetype already in the paradise story. A first indication of this is found in Genesis 3: 4 - 6, where Eve defends her desire against God's warning. What was "*good for food*" and "*desirable to make one wise*" there takes precedence over the Word she had received from God, a decisive turning point relative to the breath of life that the human had received (Genesis 2: 7; 16 - 17). This development is telling: it is the same process underlying the later tendency to judge from one's own insight instead of received wisdom. Eve's step to determine for herself what "*good and evil*" is illustrates the core of self-justification that later echoes in human judgment: placing one's own standard above the received Word. The story shows that it is not only about disobedience here but about a subtle shift: listening gives way to reasoning, receiving trust to self-justification. What appears as insight turns out in reality to be a step away from the life God had given to humanity.

The Role of God's Word and the Holy Spirit

This same tension recurs later in the Bible when speaking of Scripture as "*God-breathed*" (2 Timothy 3: 16 - 17) [4]. This means that God's Word not only provides information but also shapes life and gives direction. The connection with the paradise story here is not a literal interpretation but a reflection: where a person detaches themselves from the Word they receive, they lose their orientation; where they open themselves to it, space arises for growth and restoration. God's Word corrects not to condemn but to set right and help back on the way.

This divine breathing - "*the theopneustos*" of Scripture - points to the active presence of the Holy Spirit. It is the same Spirit who convicts of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16: 8), and grants true wisdom and discernment (1 Corinthians 2: 10 - 16). "*Not judging*" is therefore not merely a

human ethical effort; it is a fruit of being led by that same Spirit. When we open our hearts to His instruction - His guidance - we are freed from the necessity of self-righteous judgment and receive the grace to learn to look with God's own merciful gaze [5].

From Judgment to Mercy

Thus, it becomes clear how easily people confuse their own convictions with truth. What we experience as wise or justified can actually close us off to what God wants to say. Therefore, the Bible repeatedly warns against a way that seems right to a person but ultimately leads away from life (Proverbs 14: 12). True wisdom does not begin with being right but with the willingness to listen.

When we stop judging, space arises for curiosity and openness. Both Luke and Matthew show that the movement from judgment to mercy is a core attitude of a true disciple. In Luke, the condemnatory question "*Why doesn't he do it like me*?" changes into a call for self-examination: "*What does this difference say about my own heart*?" In Matthew, this returns in the emphasis on a pure heart and doing God's will (Matthew 5: 8; 7: 21). In both traditions, letting go of our judgment becomes a way to participate in God's action: a space in which He applies the true standard.

The words "*forgive, and ye shall be forgiven*" thus have a double meaning (Luke 6: 37). On one hand, it is about a social practice: reconciliation, giving space, and not pinning each other down on mistakes. On the other hand, it has a deeper layer: whoever releases the other from human judgment acknowledges that God is sovereign and that only He can judge and restore justly.

The Meaning of Judging in the Greek Context

This elaboration of Luke's words raises an inevitable question: does this radical commandment not to judge then exclude any form of admonition or moral reflection within the community? A key to the answer lies in understanding the Greek verb "*krinoo*", which Jesus uses and which is translated as "*to judge*". In its cultural and religious context, it did not simply mean "*to form an opinion*" or "*to distinguish*", but often: "*to pass a definitive, concluding verdict*", "*to assign or deprive someone of status and thereby place them outside the community or outside grace*".

When Jesus says "*Do not judge*", He primarily prohibits this act of exclusive, definitive condemnation. It is a prohibition against taking over God's role as sovereign Judge who alone knows the heart and passes the final judgment. Here the various lines of the Gospel converge and complement each other in a profound way.

The prohibition against judging is indeed fundamental. It is directed against the attitude that Jesus describes in the "*mote and the beam*": the tendency to place a definitive and condemning label on another from self-justification, superiority, or blindness to one's own failure. This judgment cuts the other off from grace and deprives them of their honor. It is an attempt to take God's place, He who alone knows the heart (cf. Genesis 3: 5).

However, from this basic principle of humility and mercy - and with this clear prohibition on exclusive krinoô in mind - not mere passivity arises but an active and caring engagement. When the heart is freed from the condemning instinct, space arises for a different kind of "*assessment*". This is not a matter of individual testing but of brotherly or sisterly care within the bond of community.

Jesus Himself refers to this in Matthew 18: 15 - 17, where He outlines a path of restorative admonition that explicitly rejects the goal of exclusion. This teaching indicates a way forward for when someone has genuinely gone astray.

Admonition Without Condemnation: Matthew 18

The core of this path that Jesus indicates is identical to the core of "*not judging*": the ultimate goal is preservation and restoration, not exclusion or humiliation. The first step is discreet and confidential - "*between you and him alone*" - precisely to protect the honor and relationship of the other. The conversation does not begin with an accusation but with an attempt at understanding, which can be formed by asking questions about the facts and motivations (the five ***W***-questions: "***W***ho", "***W***hat", "***W***here", "***W***hen", "***W***hy"). By asking questions in this order and with this intent, the conversation changes from a confrontation to an exploration. You do not assume the role of a judge passing a verdict but of a fellow human being making an effort to understand the situation and the person - your fellow traveler on the path of life. This fits perfectly with the core message of the text: the goal is restoration and preservation of the relationship, not condemnation and exclusion. These questions are a practical instrument not to forget the "beam in your own eye" and to leave space for grace and insight in the other. Only if this personal approach is persistently rejected is the circle gradually widened, not to punish but to restore the conversation with more wisdom and witnesses.

Thus, we see that the apparent tension between "*do not judge*" and "*admonish your brother*" merges into a higher unity. The admonition according to Matthew 18 is the practical application of mercy according to Luke 6. Both arise from a humble heart that knows its own "*beam*". Both refuse to make the other an object of condemnation. And both aim to "*preserve*" the other for the community and for God's Kingship - a kingship that is not about control and reckoning but about grace, restoration, and a justice that is more deeply rooted than our own, often deficient, insight.

Here it is important to consider Jesus' full teaching in Matthew 18. The process of restorative care unfortunately also has a limit. When someone, after repeated, loving attempts and involvement of the broader community, stubbornly refuses to listen to the instruction, Jesus says: "*... let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican*" (Matthew 18: 17). These words sound harsh but must be understood within the framework of the same mercy. This step is not revenge or definitive rejection by God, but an acknowledgment of reality: someone who continues to reject the foundations of the community can no longer function as part of that community. It is a protective measure, both for the congregation and a final, serious wake-up call for the person concerned themselves. The goal ultimately remains restoration, even if the path to it leads through the pain of temporary exclusion.

This leads to a community where there is space for growth and vulnerability, where mistakes are not dismissed but also not used to pin someone down forever. It is a community that, by first placing its own standards under God's mercy, is able to guide each other with integrity and grace on the path to full life. Thus arises a way of living together that does not revolve around controlling others but around participating in the space that God creates for a renewed community.

ADDENDUM

1. My starting point is that I do not use church traditions or dogmatic teachings. Yet, in this essay, I do refer to classical Jewish interpretations: the Mishnah, Midrash, and Talmud. These writings are not merely "*rules*" or "*dogmas*". They are rather the oldest manuals for reading and understanding the Hebrew Bible - the Tanakh (the Torah - the Five Books of Moses - and the Prophets). They show how the rabbis in the centuries around the beginning of our era themselves debated the meaning of these sacred texts: "*what did this law mean in practice*?" - "*what story lies behind this prophecy*?" By looking at these sources, I hope to understand the biblical texts as they were understood in Jesus' time: within their own language, culture, and thought world. Thus, it is not an appeal to a faith tradition but a way to bring the source text itself into sharper focus.

2. In the Bible, there is often talk of the "*Kingdom of God*". Personally, I prefer the translation "*Kingship of God*". The original words in Hebrew (malkhoeth) and Greek (basileia) do not so much denote a kingdom as a territory but especially kingship itself - kingship in action. By understanding the "*Kingdom of God*" as "*Kingship*", the attention shifts from a geographical place or realm to the way God reigns as King. It is not about a land with borders but about God's loving leadership over everything He has made. God is our Creator who with love and authority points the way to a life in connection with Him. His Kingship means that He guides us, like a good King, on our spiritual journey. This approach helps us understand that it is not about a place we go to but about a relationship we can live in now - a life under the loving authority of God.

From this vision, the emphasis lies on the dynamic character of Kingship as a living relationship between the King and His creature. This closely aligns with the heart of Jesus' proclamation when He says, "*The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you*" (Luke 17: 20 - 21). Kingship is thus not primarily understood as an external, institutional, or geographically localizable reality, but as an inner and recreating presence of God's rule. In the same vein, biblical talk of humans created in "*God's image and likeness*" can be understood: not merely as a static given but as a reality that is renewed and confirmed inwardly by God's Spirit (cf. Ezekiel 36: 26). Thus, the Kingship of God becomes concrete where God's Spirit recreates the human heart into a place of devotion, relationship, and life under His loving rule (cf. Addendum, point 5).

3. a. The book "*The Wisdom of Jesus Sirach*" belongs to the deuterocanonical writings. These texts are included in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible used widely from the third century BC. The book is not part of the Hebrew canon and is likewise not included in the Protestant Bible. However, within the Greek-speaking Jewish communities of antiquity, these deuterocanonical writings were considered authoritative and functioned as important wisdom literature in faith practice and ethical formation.

b. In the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, the writings that, alongside the Jewish Tanakh, have been handed down in the Septuagint are referred to as "*deuterocanonical books*" (literally: "*second canon*"). In these traditions, these writings are considered authoritative. In Protestant traditions, on the other hand, the same texts are usually referred to as "*apocrypha*" (literally "*hidden*"), a term that refers to their non-canonical status within the Protestant

understanding of the Bible.

4. In the original Greek text, Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3: 16 - 17 "*pasa graphè theopneustos*", which literally means "all Scripture God-breathed". In other words, Scripture is not merely a human-written text about God but is inspired by the same breath of life that also called creation and humanity to life (Talmud - Berakhoth 60b).

This image of breath is deeply embedded in the Bible. In Genesis 2: 7, we read that God blows the "*nish'math chajjiem*" - the breath of life - into the human. Human life does not simply arise from matter - the dust of the earth - but from a direct, life-giving act of God Himself. This breath symbolizes the unique divine origin and dignity of the human (Ezekiel 36: 27).

From this perspective, Genesis 1: 26 also gains extra depth: the human is created in God's image and likeness. That image is not a static given but is expressed in the way the human learns, discerns, grows, and acts justly. Precisely there, Paul aligns when he says that the "*God-breathed*" Scripture is profitable for doctrine, correction, and training, *"That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works*".

Job expresses the same conviction when he says, "*The spirit in man, the inspiration of the Almighty, giveth them understanding*" (Job 32: 8). Wisdom, insight, and moral discernment are not merely human achievements but the fruit of God's breath working within the human - and which continues to speak through Scripture as well.

5. In many Christian traditions, the Holy Spirit is presented as the third Person of the Trinity. However, when we return to the biblical sources - the Hebrew Bible and Jesus' own words - it is striking that "*Spirit*" (Hebrew "*ruach*" and Greek "*pneuma*") primarily refers to God's own life-giving breath: His creative and recreative power that "*hovered over the waters*" (cf. Genesis 1: 2).

In Genesis 2: 7, God breathes His breath of life into the human and life is awakened - to imperishability - where before there was dust - perishability. In Ezekiel 37, God's Spirit awakens the dead to life again, and in John 3: 8, Jesus compares the Spirit to the wind: invisible, free, and uncontrollable yet unmistakably active.

From this biblical perspective, the Spirit does not appear first and foremost as a separate Person alongside God but as God Himself in power and motivation: present, creating, and renewing. The Holy Spirit is that life-giving power with which God, from Genesis to the final call in Revelation, continually calls His creation to life.