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In Search of Sound Judgment

Danny Glover Aug 9, 2023

A black man convicted of drug crimes in 2021 had the decision overturned on appeal Aug. 3 because the white judge who presided over his trial said, “This man looks like a criminal to me.”

U.S. District Judge Stephen Murray III made the comment at a pre-trial hearing, and although a jury separately found the suspect guilty, the appeals court saw Murray’s words as an unfair prejudgment. “It’s wholly unacceptable,” the man’s lawyer added.

Murray’s mistake of judging a book by its cover is so common that it’s cliché. Unfortunately, it’s just one of many ways that people err in forming opinions about each other. These mind games have eternal consequences, “for in the same way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you” (Matthew 7:2).

The verse before the one quoted above is a go-to favorite of recalcitrant sinners who want others to accept their behavior. Read the news regularly and you are bound to see some version of the phrase “do not judge, so that you will not be judged” twisted completely out of context.

But Christians must not let the worldly abuse of a soundbite from scripture distract from Jesus’ core message (Matthew 7:1-5): People tend to be hypocrites in how they judge. They make a big deal out of the minor mistakes of others (“the speck that is in your brother’s eye”) while they are either blind to or willfully ignorant of their own serious character flaws (“the log that is in your own eye”).

That is arguably the most frequent error in judgment that people make. The next is probably reading too much

into outward appearances, like Judge Murray did. The potential explanations for that kind of lapse range from cultural ignorance and simplistic generalizations to relentless cynicism and blatant bigotry.

Jesus was a victim of such thinking on numerous occasions. In one instance, when the Jews voiced astonishment at Jesus’ ability to teach despite what they perceived as a lack of education, He reprimanded them. “Do not judge by the outward appearance, but judge with righteous judgment,” He said (John 7:14-24).

Here are some other mistakes that people make:

Rushing to judgment. The U.S. justice system has checks built into it to prevent rash decisions by law enforcers. The Bible has admonitions like these written into it to teach God’s people how to find reason in the heat of the moment:

- “One who gives an answer before he hears, it is foolishness and shame to him” (Proverbs 18:13).
- “Now everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger; for a man’s anger does not bring about the righteousness of God” (James 1:19-20).

Hearing only one side of the story. If two brothers can’t resolve a dispute between them, Jesus said they should take their case first to trusted brethren and then, if necessary, to the whole church (Matthew 18:15-17). Likewise, Paul told the Corinthians not to sue each other but to take any disputes to brethren. The idea is for impartial judges to hear from both parties before ruling because “the first to plead his case seems right until another comes and examines him” (Proverbs 18:17).

Attributing wrong motives. Wisdom (Proverbs 3:13-18) and discernment (Hebrews 5:14) are essential spiritual survival skills. But no one can read minds. Don’t be so arrogant as to think you can judge *why* somebody did something; judge *what* they actually did. Even false prophets are known by their fruits (Matthew 7:15-20). Leave it to God to “disclose the motives of human hearts” in His time (I Corinthians 4:4-5).

Showing partiality. Favoritism in the legal system is well-documented in history, with preferences shown based on money, power, sex, race and more. But God calls His people to a higher standard. The truth doesn't get any simpler than this: "To show partiality in judgment is not good" (Proverbs 24:23). The Law of Moses warned against both "partiality to the poor" and "preference to the great" (Leviticus 19:15), and James reinforced the message centuries later (James 2:1-6).

Holding grudges. This manifestation of unfair judgment fails to take into account the depth of God's mercy and forgiveness. It's a way of showing partiality to self by basking in the grace of God while refusing to show any to those who sin against you. Who are you to deny forgiveness to a penitent brother when Jesus carried your multitude of sins to the cross? Jesus reprimanded Peter when he sought to cap his willingness to forgive at a certain number of sins. Then He warned Peter in parable form that God will judge harshly those who begrudge forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35).

Jesus defined the standard of merciful judgment — forgive if you expect to be forgiven (Matthew 6:14-15) — and Paul echoed it: "Put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so must you do also" (Colossians 3:12-13).

The Notable Woman of Shunem

By Joshua Welch

In 2 Kings 4:8, the inspired text remarks, "Now it happened one day that Elisha went to Shunem, where there was a notable woman." When God's Word calls a woman "notable" (NKJV), or "great" (ASV), then we should take notice. There is no hint her greatness was on account of her physical beauty, or her social position, or even her intellectual brilliance. She may very well have been all of those things, but her greatness was seen in her...

...insistent hospitality towards a man of God (2 Kings 4:8-11). This woman has a home, a spare bed, a desk, a chair, a lamp, and extra food and insists with her husband she use it for the sake of Elisha, the prophet of God. What a relief this must have been to the traveling prophet to find respite in the Shunammite woman's home in the midst of his labor! Indeed, the most refreshing of people are often the most willingly hospitable.

...humble generosity (2 Kings 4:12-13). Elisha has been so blessed he wants to try and repay this woman with a favor. Yet, her response to his honor is "I dwell among my own people" (4:13). In other words, she is content to be home. She does not need an invitation to the king's court or extra security from the king's commander. She willingly gives to Elisha without asking for anything in return. Her generosity is not for the sake of self-serving repayment.

...honesty and candor (2 Kings 4:14-16). However, Elisha found out through Gehazi about a hole that existed in the woman's heart. She had always wanted a son. So, Elisha promises a son and the woman replies, "No, my lord, Man of God, do not lie to your maidservant!" (4:16). She was not the type of woman who wanted to hear false promises. Her heart was fragile after years of disappointment. She wanted Elisha to be truthful... and he was.

...hasty plea for help (2 Kings 4:17-30). As this woman's child, her only son, grows he is injured while working with his father (4:17-21). The woman knows where to go and to whom to make her request—she goes to the prophet Elisha (4:22-27). She informs him of the situation and makes it clear she wants Elisha to help (4:28-30). She is willing to ask for help.

...heartfelt thankfulness and worship (2 Kings 4:31-37). Her son is, indeed, brought back to life by Elisha. Before putting the child into her arms the woman "fell at his feet, and bowed to the ground..." (4:37). She is showing her thankfulness to Elisha for his help. This notable woman is hospitable, humble, honest, hasty in prayer, and heartwarmingly thankful. God bless the Shunammite woman and all those who possess her attributes today.