

# Jesus' Teaching on Judging Others<sup>1</sup>

Stephen S. Liggins

What would you consider to be the most well known verse of Scripture? D. A. Carson has written that, until recently, the best known verse in the Bible was John 3:16—and most people reading this article would probably agree. However, Carson then adds that today it has possibly been displaced by Matthew 7:1.<sup>2</sup>

Matthew 7:1? You may not recognise the reference, but you will know the content: 'Do not judge, or you too will be judged.' Carson might equally have referred to Luke 6:37a: 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged.' This teaching forms part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, and his Sermon on the Plain in Luke.

Judging others is almost universally condemned. Generally understood to mean the making of some sort of inappropriate negative interpersonal assessment, it is considered annoyingly self-righteous at best, and downright dangerous at worst. In our increasingly multi-cultural countries and on our increasingly shrinking planet it is seen as one of our greatest evils.

Judging others is disliked in the realms of high culture. Producer John Bell of the Australian Bell Shakespeare Company said that he sought to present the characters in his 2005 production of *Measure for Measure* in 'a fully rounded way, without passing judgment on them but examining their various ethical stances and moral dilemmas'.<sup>3</sup>

Judging others is disliked at the level of popular culture. Oprah has addressed the issue on one of her programs. Her guest expert argued that every time you judge others you cause yourself pain.<sup>4</sup>

Judging others is also disliked in more day-to-day life. Just type the two words into Google and note the number of YouTube entries. A recent Internet message board discussion on the topic of Angelina Jolie contained numerous negative comments about the actress. In response people posted messages like:

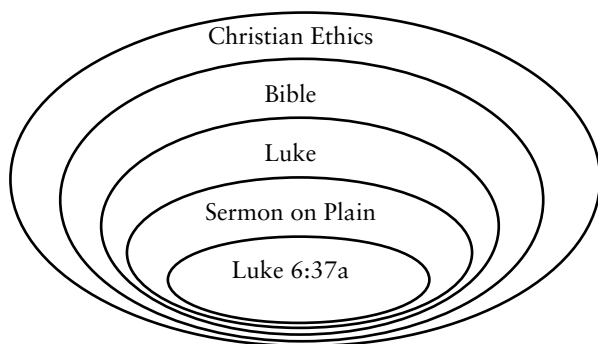
‘who are we to judge that?’ and ‘I try not to judge people because I’m not perfect no one is’.<sup>5</sup>

Judging others—both Jesus and contemporary society strongly oppose it. It is a common enemy. But what do we mean by the term judging others? What does it actually involve? If it refers to the making of some sort of inappropriate negative interpersonal assessment, who decides what is and is not inappropriate? On what basis do they make their decision? One writer has said that that the word judging is frequently used but not often understood. It can have a different meaning almost every time it is spoken.<sup>6</sup>

This paper is not primarily concerned with what contemporary western society means by ‘judging others’, but with what Jesus meant by judging others. More specifically, it seeks to discover what Jesus meant by the term judge (*krinete*) in Luke 6:37a. Surprisingly, given the contemporary social relevance of ‘judging others’, little academic work has been done on the topic. I will argue that Jesus’ understanding of the term overlaps with the contemporary western understanding, but contains some significant differences. Understanding these similarities and differences is not only crucial for Christian ethics, but, as I will show, it has significant and highly practical implications for apologetics and evangelism.

### The Method

To determine what Jesus meant by judging others, I will consider Luke 6:37a within four increasingly broad contexts: the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-49), the Gospel of Luke, the rest of the Bible, and evangelical Christian Ethics.<sup>7</sup>



I will employ a dual word study and concept study approach. The word translated as 'judge' in Luke 6:37a is *krino*. I will consider passages containing *krino* and various words arising from the same root as *krino* (i.e. *krino*-related words). This is the word study.

A word study, however, will only give us a limited understanding of our topic for two reasons. First, a word may have more than one meaning.<sup>8</sup> Second, the one concept may be described using different words.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, I will consider passages in which Jesus teaches about, or in which events exemplify, the concept of judging others. This is the concept study.<sup>10</sup> The insights gained from our study of the Sermon on the Plain should give us a preliminary understanding of what the concept of judging others actually involves.

### The Context of the Sermon on the Plain

The immediate context for Luke 6:37a is the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-49). Luke 6:17 tells us that the sermon was given in the presence of a 'large crowd of his disciples ... and a great number of people'. The Sermon opens with the disciples being addressed (Luke 6:20a). It concludes with the assertion that many people heard it (Luke 7:1a). I conclude that Jesus was addressing his disciples,<sup>11</sup> but with the intention that all would hear.<sup>12</sup> The teaching is strongly ethical with an emphasis on loving others,<sup>13</sup> particularly loving one's enemies. Some consider this love for one's enemies to be the essence of Jesus' ethic in this Sermon.<sup>14</sup>

The Luke 6:37a teaching on judging others occurs in the small Luke 6:37-38 sub-section of the Sermon. This sub-section is immediately preceded by teaching on loving one's enemies and being merciful. Joseph Fitzmyer asserts that Luke 6:37a 'is but another application of the counsel of love'.<sup>15</sup> The sub-section is then followed by four parables. The second (i.e. the Parable of the Speck and Plank) deals quite directly with the idea of judging others. The third (i.e. the Parable of the Tree and the Fruit) helps us to modify our understanding of the idea.

Luke 6:37-38 itself, might be summarised as 'a set of four exhortations, two negative and two positive, each of which also has a promise. A note on God's evaluative standard ... concludes the paragraph.'<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, it might be presented as follows:

*Kai me krinete, kai ou me krithete;*  
*Kai me katadikazete, kai ou me katadikasthete.*  
*Apolyete, kai apolythesete;*  
*Didote, kai dothesetai hymin;*  
*metron kalon pepiesmenon sesaleumenon hyperekchynnomenon dosousin*  
*eis ton kolpon hymon;*  
*hoi gar metroi metreite antimetretesetai hymin.*

Luke 6:37a contains the first two of Luke's six uses of *krino* in Luke. Frederick Buchsel notes that the word *krino* is related in root to the Latin word *cerno*, which means 'to sunder'. In the basic sense it means 'to part' or 'to sift', which leads to the sense of 'to divide out' or 'to select'. The most common meaning is 'to decide', 'to judge' and 'to assess'.<sup>17</sup> In the New Testament, *krino* predominantly means to 'judge', and especially relates to the judgment of God.<sup>18</sup> However, it can be used, not only for 'official judgment but also for personal judgments on others'.<sup>19</sup> I will argue that the first occurrence of *krino* in Luke 6:37 refers to a personal judgment. The second refers to the judgment of God.<sup>20</sup> This paper is concerned with this first occurrence of *krino*.

Luke 6:37a is set out in the form of a condition. In the protasis of the condition the verb *krinete* is a present active imperative second person plural, which with *me* forms a prohibition.<sup>21</sup> The present tense suggests a continual attitude. Accordingly, Jesus exhorts his audience not to judge—not now nor in the future. The *apodosis* of the condition then sets out the consequences of complying with the prohibition. It contains the verb *krithete* (an aorist passive subjunctive second person plural) along with the words *ou me*. This combination forms an emphatic negation subjunctive—'the strongest way to negate something in Greek'.<sup>23</sup> Jesus thus assures his addressees in the strongest possible terms that they will not be judged by God<sup>24</sup> if they themselves continue not to judge.

To fine tune the meaning of this exhortation, we need to understand the subject, object and meaning of *krinete*. The subject of the verb *krinete* in this verse would seem to be the same group of people as that group to which the sermon was addressed—that is, Jesus' disciples and the crowd.

While the object of the verb is not specifically stated, the following three

exhortations in the Luke 6:37-38 apply most logically to people. Accordingly, the context here would suggest that the judging applies to the assessment of other people as opposed to situations. The identity of these people is not stated. However, the wording of Luke 6:37a does not in any way restrict the category of people to which it could apply. Furthermore, the context of the Sermon encourages the application of the verse in the broadest possible terms in that everyone should love even their enemies.

Jesus' hearers are exhorted not to judge other people. What does judge mean? We noted Buchsel's comments earlier to the effect that the most common meaning of *krino* was 'to decide', 'to judge' and 'to assess'.<sup>25</sup> Thus, we might say that Jesus' hearers are being urged not to make a certain sort of assessment of other people. But what sort of assessment?

Various commentators argue that Luke 6:37b is helpful in understanding Luke 6:37a.<sup>26</sup> To 'condemn' someone pre-supposes that a negative assessment has been made. This might suggest that to judge someone also implies that a negative assessment has been made. This is the assumption or conclusion of the majority of commentators.

It seems unlikely, however, that Jesus' hearers are forbidden from making any sort of negative assessment of others, as two of the four parables that follow Luke 6:37-38 appear to call upon people directly or by implication to make certain negative assessments of others.<sup>27</sup>

The Parable of the Speck and the Plank (Luke 6:41-42) questions how one can look at the speck in another's eye (i.e. a minor fault in another person), while ignoring the plank in one's own eye (i.e. a major fault in one's own life). The parable argues that a person should remove the plank from their own eye so that they can see clearly to remove the speck from the other person's eye.

This teaches, amongst other things, that a person's own sin hinders their ability to identify sin in the life of another person. Accordingly, individuals are limited in their capacity to accurately make a negative assessment of another person. The parable also appears to teach that a person should deal with their own sin before attempting to assist another person with theirs. Darrell Bock argues that this parable 'does not tell someone never to deal with other people's problems.

Rather, it says to take care of the major problem in your life and then you will be able to help someone else'.<sup>28</sup>

The Parable of the Tree and Fruit (Luke 6:43-45) teaches that we identify what a person is like from their words and actions, in the same way we can identify a tree by its fruit. This parable, in fact, calls upon people to make assessments of other people. Such assessments may be positive (i.e. like identifying a good tree by its good fruit), but they may also be negative (i.e. like identifying a bad tree by its bad fruit). I shall refer to these sorts of approved interpersonal assessments as 'interpersonal discernment'.

At this stage we might summarise our findings as:

*Judging others = a negative interpersonal assessment of which Jesus disapproves. Jesus will disapprove of such an assessment where:*

- *it is inconsistent with an attitude of love;<sup>29</sup> and/or*
- *the assessor is unaware of their limited ability to assess accurately as a result of their sin, and/or*
- *the assessor has made no effort to first deal with the sin in their own life.*

Similarly, and whilst not the focus of this paper, I shall define interpersonal discernment as follows:

*Interpersonal discernment = an interpersonal assessment of which Jesus approves.*

But can we be more specific about judging others? Various commentators who write on Luke 6:37a suggest that the issue is that people should not 'pass judgment in doubtful and indifferent matters, which bear no resemblance to sin, or which are not serious or forbidden',<sup>30</sup> that judging refers to 'the human tendency to criticise and find fault with one's neighbour',<sup>31</sup> and that judging involves a censorious attitude.<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, Bock adds a particular nuance. He sees a judgmental perspective as being one that holds another person 'down in guilt and never seeks to encourage them toward God'.<sup>33</sup> To determine whether these ideas should be included in our definition of judging will require a wider context.

### The context of the Gospel of Luke

A word study does not greatly assist us. The verb *krino* occurs on six occasions in Luke.<sup>34</sup> On none of those occasions is it used in exactly the same sense as it

is when first used in Luke 6:37a. The other five references relate more to the assessment of situations (as opposed to people), or to assessment in a judicial context (as opposed to an interpersonal context).

Various words arise from the same root as *krino*. Luke contains six different *krino*-related words, which are of some relevance to our study:

*anakrino*: question, examine, investigate in court, judge, discern;

*epikrino*: decide, determine;

*katakrino*: pronounce a sentence on (after a determination of guilt), condemn;

*krima*: dispute, lawsuit, legal decision, decree, judgment;

*krisis*: judging, judgment, court, right;

*krites*: judge, ruler.<sup>35</sup>

There are 17 occurrences of these *krino*-related words in Luke.<sup>36</sup> All relate to a judicial context (as opposed to an interpersonal context).<sup>37</sup>

Accordingly, an examination of these words and passages would increase our understanding of judicial assessment (both in the present age and at the final judgment), and situational assessment. It does not, however, directly impact on our understanding of *krino* in the first sense in which it is used in Luke 6:37a.

A concept study is far more fruitful. The Gospel of Luke is full of assessments. In fact, every sentence contains an assessment of some sort. Assessments are made by God the Father, Jesus, Luke (including his sources), people, angels, the devil and demons. Assessments are made of God the Father, Jesus, people, angels, the devil, demons and situations. These assessments are both direct and implied, approved and disapproved, as well as positive and negative. I will examine certain key passages where negative interpersonal assessments are made, and are of a sort of which Jesus disapproves.

Luke describes a number of situations where Pharisees make such assessments.<sup>38</sup> Luke 7:36-50 is a good example. Here Jesus is invited to dine at the house of Simon the Pharisee. A woman 'who had lived a sinful life' comes to the house, cries on Jesus' feet, wipes them with her hair, kisses them and pours perfume on them. Simon privately concludes that if Jesus were a prophet he would know what kind of woman was touching him. Jesus then tells a parable about two debtors, illustrating the idea that someone who has been

forgiven much loves much, whereas whoever has been forgiven little loves little. The debtor who has been forgiven much represents the woman, and people who are like her. The debtor who has been forgiven little represents Simon and people who are like him.

A consideration of the interpersonal assessments made by Simon and by Jesus is illuminating. First, Simon, who seems to have a very positive assessment of himself, makes a negative assessment of the woman—a ‘sinner’. Pharisees rejected ‘fellowship with the unrighteous’.<sup>39</sup> They were separatists. Influenced by Leviticus 10:10 they held to the idea of ‘salvation by segregation’.<sup>40</sup> As Jesus’ parable indicates, Jesus clearly disapproves of Simon’s assessment of the woman. Simon judges the woman.

Second, Simon makes a negative assessment of Jesus who does not shun such contact with the woman. In fact, Simon appears to have made a negative assessment of Jesus before the woman entered the room. The passage highlights that he had ignored various courtesies when Jesus arrived. Jesus describes how his host did not give him water for his feet, did not kiss him, and did not put oil on his head. Kenneth Bailey, an expert in Middle Eastern culture, says that this ‘reflects far more than formal inadequacies as a gracious host’.<sup>41</sup> Again, as Jesus’ parable with its explanation indicates, Jesus disapproves of Simon’s assessment of Jesus. Simon judges Jesus. Simon judges the woman and judges Jesus. Here we gain an insight into why some people may hold judgmental attitudes—like the person with the plank in their eye, they fail to appreciate their own sinfulness and need for forgiveness.

Third, it is important to note that Jesus also makes a negative assessment of the woman—he acknowledges that she had committed ‘many sins’. In contrast to the Pharisee, Jesus is keen to interact with the woman. He is concerned about her salvation and eventually reveals that the woman’s sins have been forgiven on the basis of her faith. A good summary of Jesus’ mission would be—‘calling sinners to repentance’.<sup>42</sup> This mission is not accomplished by ‘separatism’.<sup>43</sup> Here Jesus exemplifies the making of an appropriate negative interpersonal assessment. On the basis of my earlier definition, Jesus is discerning.

Fourth, Jesus also makes a negative assessment of Simon. He indicates that Simon’s attitude to the woman is wrong, his attitude to Jesus is wrong, in fact,



his attitude to himself is wrong. As with the woman, Jesus does not shun contact with him. We see that Jesus is happy to dine with Simon. In addition, Jesus is gracious when Simon ignores the social courtesies that should have been paid to him. Furthermore, he seeks to teach the Pharisee in the hope that he, like the woman, will seek salvation. Again, Jesus is discerning.

This passage, along with the others involving Pharisees, flesh out the dynamics of the sort of judging that Jesus appears to be discouraging in Luke 6:37a. They show a Pharisee (or those like them): making positive assessments of themselves; making negative assessments of sinners; shunning contact with such sinners; and making negative assessments of Jesus, who does not shun such contact. By contrast they show Jesus displaying appropriate negative interpersonal assessments—examples of discernment.

Two passages in Luke 9 show Jesus teaching his disciples about making negative interpersonal assessments—the first describes approved assessments, the second disapproved assessments.

In Luke 9:1-5 Jesus sends out the twelve 'to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick'. Amongst other things, Jesus instructs the disciples regarding what to do if the people of a town do not welcome them. He tells them they are to shake the dust off their feet when they leave the town as a testimony against them. Jesus is calling upon his disciples to make an assessment of other people—and the assessment may sometimes be negative.

Why the shaking of dust from the feet? It seems to be symbolic, some kind of 'performative testimony against the village'.<sup>44</sup> Bock asserts that the 'act warns the rejecters of impending judgment if their decision does not change'.<sup>45</sup>

Here we see Jesus encouraging his followers to make a certain sort of negative interpersonal assessment. The negative assessment and corresponding symbolic warning are made for the good of the townspeople—that is, they are warned of their need to accept Jesus' message. The motivation here seems to be a love for sinners. According to Jesus' mission the most loving thing that someone can do for another is to bring them into contact with the message of the kingdom of God and to urge its importance upon them.

Later in Luke 9:51-56 we see Jesus' followers being rebuked for making inappropriate interpersonal negative assessments. Jesus is heading for Jerusalem when a particular Samaritan village does not welcome him. James and John ask Jesus: 'Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy them?' Jesus rebukes them. The basis of the rebuke is not specified, but can be deduced.

Having made a negative assessment, James and John do not then suggest carrying out some sort of performative testimony by way of warning. Instead they make a negative assessment and suggest carrying out a judicial sentence by way of calling down fire from heaven.

It seems that a negative assessment with respect to another person's receptivity to Jesus does not constitute a judgmental attitude if it is associated with an attitude that desires their repentance. It will constitute a judgmental attitude if the desire for repentance is lacking. Acting in such a way so as to prevent potential future repentance would certainly constitute judging.

Jesus provides further teaching about appropriate negative interpersonal assessments in Luke 17:3-4. Jesus teaches his disciples to rebuke a sinning brother and, if he repents, to forgive him. If the brother sins against a disciple seven times and each time repents, the disciple must forgive him. How do we square this teaching with the prohibition on judging others, and particularly the Parable of the Speck and the Plank?

A few points may be noted here. First, an accurate assessment of the sin is presupposed. Second, the rebuke relates to a particular form of sin—a sin committed against the person who rebukes. Third, the rebuke is consistent with love in that it is associated with an attitude that will be quick to forgive in the light of any repentance. Thus, the desired outcome is a positive one—that of repentance and restoration of relationship.<sup>46</sup> Bearing these points in mind, rebuking can be distinguished from judging.

We can now further refine our definition of judging others:

*Judging others = a negative interpersonal assessment of which Jesus disapproves.*

*Jesus will disapprove of a such an assessment where:*

- *it is inconsistent with an attitude of love. (This may be associated with a lack of desire for contact with another person, and a lack of desire for their repentance and/or salvation.), and/or*
- *the assessor is unaware of their of limited ability to assess accurately as a result of their sin, and/or*
- *the assessor has made no effort to first deal with the sin in their own life. (This may be associated with the assessors lack of humility, and lack of ability to see their own need.)*

We can continue to define interpersonal discernment as follows:

*Interpersonal discernment = an interpersonal assessment of which Jesus approves.*

### The context of the Bible

I will now consider our Lukan understanding of judging others within the context of the remainder of the Bible. Naturally, our analysis here will be highly selective.<sup>47</sup>

**The Old Testament:** I could not locate any instance where *krino* was used in the LXX (or the relevant Hebrew words in the Masoretic Text)<sup>48</sup> to describe judging others in the sense of Luke 6:37a.<sup>49</sup>

There are numerous passages, however, where the concept of judging others is addressed, for example the situation described in 2 Samuel 12:1-14.<sup>50</sup> In this passage the prophet Nathan tells King David a story in which a rich man takes a poor man's lamb to prepare a meal. David makes a strongly negative assessment of the rich man in the story: 'As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die!' Then Nathan, referring to David's dealings with Uriah and Bathsheba, reveals to David: 'You are the man!'

David displays a judgmental attitude. He is quick to find fault in another, while being blind to his own shortcomings.<sup>51</sup> Thus, David provides a good example of the attitude addressed in Jesus' Parable of the Speck and the Plank. However David, unlike some of Jesus' contemporaries, repents upon having his hypocrisy revealed.

**The New Testament:** There are quite a number of passages in the New Testament that are helpful for our word and concept study of this topic.<sup>52</sup>

Matthew 7:1-2, for example, is similar to Luke 6:37-38 (Luke 6:37a's immediate context). In Matthew 7:1 Jesus spoke against judging others: *Me krinete hina me krithete*. This verse is very similar to Luke 6:37a: *Kai me krinete kai ou me krithete*.

There are minor differences in the wording—for example, Luke uses the stronger emphatic negation subjunctive<sup>53</sup> (*ou me krithete*), while Matthew simply uses a prohibitive subjunctive (*me krithete*). However, since both passages so clearly discourage judging it would seem wrong to make too much of the differences.

The use of *krino* in John 7:14-24 helps highlight the limitation of human interpersonal assessments. Here Jesus is teaching in the temple courts at the Feast of Tabernacles. He is speaking with the crowd who, he says, want to kill him. The crowd, in turn, accuse Jesus of being demon-possessed. According to our definition from Luke, the crowd has judged Jesus. In verse 24 Jesus accuses the Jews of assessing ('judging'—*krinete*) 'by mere appearances', and urges them to make a right assessment ('judgment'—*krisin*). Their faulty assessment is the result of faulty criteria—they assess by mere appearances.

In Romans 2:1-4, Paul talks specifically about judging others. He says that those who pass judgment (*krinon*) on others are condemning themselves because they do the same things. This passage seems to use *krinon* in the sense of a negative assessment of another associated with a lack of awareness of one's own guilt. This summary is consistent with our Lukan understanding, the passage obviously having a lot in common with Luke's Parable of the Speck and the Plank.

Paul again teaches on judging others in Romans 14:1-23—specifically, judging others inside the church. Paul outlines how strong and weak Christians should treat each other in the area of disputable matters—that is, matters where there are differences of opinion.<sup>54</sup> One disputable matter discussed is that of food. Verse 3 says that the person who eats everything should not 'look down on' (*exoutheneito*) the person who does not, and the person who does not eat everything should not 'condemn' (*krineto*) the person who does. Later Paul in verse 13, addressing both strong and weak Christians,<sup>55</sup> summarises: 'Therefore let us stop passing judgment (*krinomen*) on one another.'

Romans 14 provides a number of reasons for not judging others all of which reinforce our conclusions from Luke's Gospel. I will highlight two. First, a consideration of Romans 13 and Romans 14:15 highlights that judging others appears to be inconsistent with an attitude of love. Second, judging others is inappropriate as there is the matter of a person's limited ability to accurately assess a situation. The sorts of negative assessments discussed here relate to disputable matters—that is, particular matters where Christians draw different conclusions regarding the appropriate way to act.

James 4:11-12 warns that anyone who 'judges' (*krinon*) his brother, 'judges' (*krineis*) the law. James concludes this section with: 'But you—who are you to judge (*krinon*) your neighbour?' This passage is speaking about the behaviour of Christians within the church. Context suggests that judging is some sort of negative interpersonal assessment.

One of the reasons given for not judging is that judging one's brother appears to be inconsistent with an attitude of love. James says that to judge one's brother is to judge (or make a negative assessment of) the law. Barclay and Motyer argue that the 'law', in this instance, is the 'royal law' described in James 2:8—'Love your neighbour as yourself'.<sup>56</sup>

In summary, it seems that the remainder of the Bible reinforces various conclusions we reached regarding judging others from the Gospel of Luke. This suggests that a basic understanding of what judging others meant was fairly widely understood in the early church. It also means there is no need to modify our earlier summary formula.

### The context of Christian Ethics

Since judging others is an ethical issue, it might be better understood by considering it as part of the Bible's overall ethical system. Christian ethicists who share my pre-suppositions regarding Scripture,<sup>57</sup> such as Michael Hill and Oliver O'Donovan,<sup>58</sup> argue for the underlying unity to the ethics of the Bible. O'Donovan, for example, says that the Bible contains 'a comprehensive moral viewpoint', not 'disconnected moral claims'.<sup>59</sup>

Both ethicists seek the foundational ethic that underlies and unifies the ethical material in the Bible. O'Donovan argues that the 'loving God and loving one's

neighbour' (Matt. 22:37-40) is supreme 'among the principles of order which unify the obligations of the moral law'.<sup>60</sup>

Accordingly, ethical actions and attitudes will be consistent with love—as defined by Scripture. Unethical actions and attitudes, such as judging others, will be inconsistent with love—as defined by Scripture. The issue obviously becomes: What is love? How does Scripture define love?

Both argue that love involves recognising and appropriately responding to reality. Hill asserts: 'Love has an objective basis.'<sup>61</sup> O'Donovan notes: 'Purposeful action is determined by what is true about the world into which we act; this can be called the 'realist' principle'.<sup>62</sup>

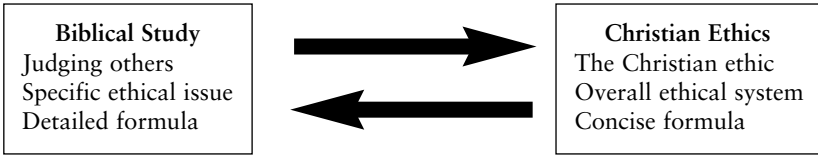
Both also argue that the Bible reveals the generic order (*kind*) and telic order (*purpose*) of things in creation, and that Christian Ethics is sensitive to generic and telic order.<sup>63</sup> Different kinds of things have different purposes. Accordingly, what love looks like will often vary depending upon the context. For example, the way in which a man expresses love for his wife will differ to the way he expresses love to his children or his parents. Throughout its pages, the Bible teaches us what love looks like in different contexts.

Hill argues that the Bible contains, and that Christians should operate on, a mutual love ethic:<sup>64</sup>

*Mutual Love = An action or trait of character is right if and only if it promotes (creates or maintains) mutual love relationship between (a) God and humans, and (b) humans and humans.*<sup>65</sup>

Putting it another way, it would seem that love is concerned with entry into the kingdom of God and appropriate living in the kingdom of God.

Given the unity of biblical teaching, the specific ethical teaching regarding judging others should be understood as being part of, and consistent with the overall Christian ethic. Similarly, the overall Christian ethic should be understood as summarising the totality of biblical ethical teaching of which the teaching on judging others forms a part. By allowing these two perspectives to interact with each other, we can arrive a better understanding of both judging others and the overall Christian ethic.



By combining these two perspectives, a general definition of judging others might be re-worded as:

*Judging others = a negative interpersonal assessment that does not promote mutual love between God and humans, and humans and humans.*

Similarly, a general definition of interpersonal discernment might be:

*Interpersonal discernment = an interpersonal assessment that promotes mutual love between God and humans, and humans and humans.*

Obviously, we need to know what sorts of things will and will not promote mutual love. Our examination of judging others reveals that the following actions will not promote mutual love:

- *a person's lack of desire for contact with another person;*
- *a person's lack of concern for another's repentance and salvation;*
- *assessments by a person who is out of touch with reality, e.g. where they:*
  - *are unaware of their limited ability to assess accurately as a result of their own sin;*
  - *have made no effort to first deal with the sin in their own life (this may be associated with their lack of humility, and their lack of ability to see their own need).*

## Conclusion

We have noted the strong dislike of judgmental attitudes at all levels of our society. We are now in a position to see how Jesus' understanding of not judging others compares with society's understanding.

For the purposes of this article, we might define a contemporary western social understanding of judging others as follows:

*Judging others (contemporary) = a negative interpersonal assessment of which 'X' disapproves.*

As we can see, this definition is highly subjective—it depends entirely upon the identity of 'X'. There are countless bases upon which 'X' might determine their disapproval.

Carson has written about the subjective nature of contemporary popular ethics: ‘Personal and social ethics have been removed from the realms of truth and of structures of thought; they have ... been relativized.’<sup>66</sup> This is, of course, what we would expect from a culture that has been heavily influenced by post-modernism with its ‘pluralism of perspectives’.<sup>67</sup>

So, how does Jesus’ teaching on judging others square with the subjective understanding that seems to be held by contemporary western society? Points of continuity include the following: judging others involves some sort of negative interpersonal assessment; judging others is bad; judging others is an important issue.

The main point of discontinuity relates to the question of authority. Who determines which negative interpersonal assessments are wrong? For the Christian, it is the Trinitarian God whose thoughts are contained in the Scriptures. For contemporary western society there is a plethora of conflicting authorities from which to choose.

As should be apparent by now, there are numerous situations that Jesus **would not** consider judgmental, but which many people contemporary western society **would** consider judgmental. For example, Jesus tells the woman who wept at his feet that her ‘sins are forgiven’ (Luke 7:48) and that her faith ‘has saved’ her. (Luke 7:50) Many today would consider Jesus judgmental in his assessment that the woman had sinned and needed to be saved.

Similarly, there are numerous situations that Jesus **would consider** judgmental, but that contemporary western society **would not consider** (or recognise as) judgmental. For example, Bishop John Spong has written: ‘The sacrificial concept that focuses on the saving blood of Jesus that somehow washes me clean, so popular in evangelical and fundamentalists circles, is by and large repugnant to us today.’<sup>68</sup> Many today would agree with this statement. They would not consider it judgmental. Jesus, however, would.

## Implications

It is particularly important that Christians correctly understand Jesus’ teaching on judging others. A correct understanding has important ethical, apologetic and evangelistic implications.



**Ethics:** Christians need to ensure their attitudes and behaviour are shaped by Jesus' teaching, rather than by the practices of those around them. For example, people today often seek to avoid those with whom they disagree. This often goes hand-in-hand with a judgmental attitude. By contrast, Jesus actively sought out, in love, people with whom he disagreed and of whom he had made a negative assessment. Christians are exhorted to love everyone. In many cases, they will want to seek out and maintain relationships with those with whom they disagree.

**Apologetics:** Both Christians and non-Christians alike agree that judging others is bad. Accordingly, this topic can serve as an apologetic point of contact in sermons, conversations, and in interaction with the mass media and culture. I have found that a concern over judging others resonates with both Christians and non-Christians alike. If you give a sermon on judging others, you will start with everybody on board.

**Evangelism:** There are two points to highlight here. First, a proper understanding of judging others will protect us from being influenced by one particular disincentive to evangelise. Contemporary society's understanding of judging others would probably consider judgmental the assertion that people are 'sinners in need of salvation'. Jesus' teaching on judging others would certainly not lead to this conclusion. A more serious difference in the understanding and application of judging others can scarcely be imagined.

Second, a number of the passages used to understand the concept of judging others also provide us with material for use in evangelism. For example, many of the stories that contrast Jesus' non-judgmental attitude with other people's judgmental attitudes (e.g. Jesus' interaction with Simon the Pharisee and the 'sinful' woman in Luke 7) have both apologetic and evangelistic force. Such stories would appeal to contemporary audiences in that they show Jesus reaching out to people in love. These stories also show Jesus' concern that people be saved.

Stephen S. Liggins is a PhD student at Moore Theological College and the University of Sydney, and a part-time assistant minister at Toongabbie Anglican Church.

## ENDNOTES

1. This paper is an abbreviated version of my MTh thesis, a copy of which is in the

Moore College library.

2. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 21.
3. Bell Shakespeare 'Measure for Measure by William Shakespeare. Directed by John Bell.' (Program for Sydney Production, 2005), p. 6.
4. [http://www.oprah.com/tows/pastshows/tows\\_past\\_20010226.jhtml](http://www.oprah.com/tows/pastshows/tows_past_20010226.jhtml)
5. <Http://au.messages.yahoo.com/news/entertainment/18760/>
6. Dave Swavely, *Who are You to Judge? The Dangers of Judging and Legalism* (New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2005), p. 1.
7. My approach pre-supposes the inspiration, progressive revelatory nature and unity of Scripture, as well as the centrality of the gospel of Jesus. My MTh thesis also considered the Bible's teaching against the backdrop of Jewish, Greek and Roman ethical outlooks of Jesus' day.
8. For example, in English the word 'run' may convey the concept of 'jog', as well as the concept of 'route'.
9. For example, someone studying the concept of 'the seaside' may gain assistance from writings dealing with 'the beach', 'the coast' and 'the waterfront'.
10. Barr notes that 'Theological thought of the type found in the NT has its characteristic linguistic expression not in the word individually but in the word-combination or sentence'. James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 233. See also Moises Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), p. 27.
11. Fitzmyer argues that it was 'addressed specifically to the disciples'. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke: I-IX* (NY: Doubleday, 1981), p. 627.
12. Green argues that it was also directed to the people 'as an invitation and challenge to all'. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 261.
13. Bock considers that Jesus' remarks on love in this sermon are more profound than 1 Corinthians 13. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: Volume 1: 1:1-9:50* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), p. 548.
14. L. John Topel, "The Lukan Version of the Lord's Sermon," *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, vol. 11, 1981:52. See Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), p. 116.
15. Fitzmyer, *Luke: I-IX*, p. 630. See also Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount: Including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3-7:27 and Luke 6:20-49)*, Adela Y. Collins (ed.), (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), p. 614.

16. Bock, *Luke: Vol. 1*, p. 587.
17. Friedrich Buchsel 'krino' in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Kittel (ed.), Geoffrey W Bromiley (trans. & ed.), 10 vols; (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 3:922.
18. Buchsel 'krino', p. 3:923.
19. Buchsel 'krino', p. 3:923.
20. This conclusion regarding the second use of *krino* is justified in my MTh thesis.
21. Daniel B Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1996) p. 487
22. Cleon L. Rogers Jr. & Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), p. 122. However, recent work in the area of verbal aspect indicates that the study of the tense of Greek verbs is in a state of flux. Accordingly, some caution must be exercised in drawing conclusions from tense. See Constantine R. Campbell, "Verbal Aspect in the Greek New Testament: The Indicative Mood in Narrative," (Ph.D. thesis. Macquarie University, 2006), p. 2.
23. Wallace, *Greek*, p. 468.
24. See my MTh thesis for an explanation of what this judgement of God looks like. In summary, my conclusion is as follows:  
*A person who judges another person faces God's judgment.*  
*If the person is a follower of Jesus they face*
  - *the immanent discipline or rebuke of God; and/or*
  - *a non-salvation-related eschatological judgment.**If the person is not a follower of Jesus they face the salvation-related eschatological judgment (where they will be assessed and sentenced on the basis of their response to Jesus).*
25. Buchsel, 'krino' p. 3:922.
26. See Earle E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (revised edn.) (London: Oliphants, 1974), p. 116; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), pp. 265-67.
27. Marshall suggests that the Parable of the Speck and the Plank is included here by Luke because of its 'relevance to the question of judging others'. Marshall, *Gospel*, p. 268.
28. Bock, *Luke: Vol. 1*, p. 614. See J. Duncan, M. Derrett, 'Christ and Reproof (Matthew 7.1-7/Luke 6.37-42)' *New Testament Studies*, vol. 34, 1988:277.
29. Consistent with this suggestion, Green says that the exhortation not to judge is 'nothing but the command to love one's enemies restated negatively'. Green, *Gospel*, p. 275.

30. St. Thomas Aquinas *Cantena Aurea: A Commentary on the Four Gospels Collected Out of the Works of the Fathers by St. Thomas Aquinas: Vol. III: St. Luke* (ed. Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman of the Oratory; London: Saint Austin 1997), p. 222.
31. Fitzmyer, *Luke: I-IX*, p. 641.
32. Ellis, *Gospel*, p. 116; Marshall, *Gospel*, pp. 265-67; Bock, *Luke: Vol. 1*, p. 605.
33. Bock, *Luke: Vol. 1*, p. 605.
34. Luke 6:37 (twice); 7:43; 12:57; 19:22; 22:30.
35. See Frederick William Danker (ed.), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3rd edn.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 66, 374, 519, 567, 569, 570; Johannes P. Louw & Eugene A. Nida (eds.), *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains: Volume 2: Indices* (2 vols; 2nd edn.), (NY: United Bible Societies, 1988,1989), pp. 15, 99, 133, 147, 148.
36. Luke 10:14; 11:19; 11:31 (twice); 11:32 (twice); 11:42; 12:14; 12:58 (twice); 18:2; 18:6; 20:47; 23:14; 23:24; 23:40; 24:20
37. The use of *krisin* (justice) in Luke 12:14, has more of an ethical than a judicial meaning. However, justice is often something that can be judicially enforced.
38. Luke 5:27-32; 7:36-50; 15:11-32; 18:9-14; 19:1-10. In Luke 15:11-32 the older brother represents the Pharisees and scribes. Tannehill, *Luke*, p. 244. Green, *Gospel*, p. 586. In Luke 19:1-10 Pharisees are not involved, however, 'all the people' display judgmental attitudes that are almost identical to those of the Pharisees in earlier accounts.
39. Bock, *Luke: Vol. 1*, p. 489.
40. Fitzmyer, *Luke: I-IX*, p. 589. See Green, *Gospel*, p. 245.
41. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 58-59 in Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary Cultural Approach to the Parables of Luke* (combined eds.), (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 18.
42. Bock, *Luke: Vol. 1*, p. 498.
43. See Bock, *Luke: Vol. 1*, p. 500.
44. Green, *Gospel*, p. 360.
45. Bock, *Luke: Vol. 1*, p. 817.
46. Marshall, *Gospel*, p. 643; Green, *Gospel*, p. 613.
47. For a more detailed but still highly selective analysis, see my MTh thesis.
48. Volkmar Hertrich '*krino*', in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Kittel (ed.); Geoffrey W Bromiley (trans. & ed.); 10 vols; (Grand Rapids:

- Eerdmans, 1965), p. 3:923.
49. Lev. 19:15 seems to describe an interpersonal assessment, however, Harrison suggests it relates more to the judicial administration of justice. R. K. Harrison *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, IVP, 1980), p. 198.
  50. A good analysis of judgmental attitudes could also be made from Job.
  51. See Joyce Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: IVP 1988) p. 237
  52. For example, Matt. 7:1-5; John 7:14-24; 8:12-30; Acts 11:2; 26:24; Rom. 2:1-4; 14:1-23; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; James 4:11-12.
  53. As previously noted, the emphatic negation subjunctive is the 'strongest way to negate something in Greek'. Wallace, *Greek*, p. 468.
  54. Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 837.
  55. Cranfield suggests that in v. 13, *krino* 'is best understood as addressed to both strong and weak alike'. C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans: Volume II: Commentary on Romans IX-XVI and Essays* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), p. 711.
  56. William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter* (2nd edn.), (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1960), p. 131. Alec Motyer, *The Message of James: The Tests of Faith* (Leicester: IVP, 1985), p. 158. Moo's argument, while slightly different, would produce a similar conclusion. Moo, *James*, p. 152.
  57. See footnote 7.
  58. See, e.g., Hill on interpretation; O'Donovan on evangelical foundations. Michael Hill, *The How and Why of Love: An Introduction to Evangelical Ethics* (Sydney: Matthias Media, 2002), pp. 51-3; Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (2nd edn.), (Leicester: IVP, 1994), p. 11.
  59. O'Donovan, *Resurrection*, p. 200.
  60. O'Donovan, *Resurrection*, p. 201.
  61. Hill, *The How and Why of Love*, p. 78.
  62. O'Donovan, *Resurrection*, p. ix.
  63. Hill, *The How and Why of Love*, pp. 66-67; O'Donovan, *Resurrection*, pp. 31-32.
  64. Hill, *The How and Why of Love*, pp. 121-35.
  65. Hill, *The How and Why of Love*, p. 131.
  66. D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 24.
  67. James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog* (3rd edn.), (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), p. 174.
  68. John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture* (NY: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 234.