

Time to judge

Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God.

1 Corinthians 4:5

Here is an opportunity for us to understand contextual meaning and application. We have plenty of admonitions in scripture to make judgments and to discern rightly. Yet here the apostle Paul says to judge nothing before the time of the Lord's coming, when He will bring all things into judgment. However, in the next two chapters he exhorts the Corinthians to judge issues among church members, first those who profess to know Christ yet live publicly against Him and His revealed will, and then in cases of disputes among themselves. John in his epistles calls on believers to judge if teachers be true or false, and to judge their own consistency of profession and practice. Of course, many in our modern culture have adopted a convenient view of Jesus' warning to "judge not," while missing the ensuing context in Matthew chapter seven, which goes on to explain that judgment ought to be equitable and reciprocal. So which is it, are we to judge or not?

We can learn from these different passages that, in fact, there are times to judge and times to reserve judgment. In the context of today's verse, Paul has been discussing the Corinthians' unhealthy practice of comparing teacher against teacher, particularly Apollos and himself, and apparently attempting to divide the temple of God, which is the church body (3:16-17), over whom they followed. At this point it seems from the context that even motives were being judged, which he describes as hidden things and the counsels of the hearts. He therefore makes it clear that he doesn't even trust himself to rightly judge all of his own motives, as he probably honestly assessed the intricacies of the human heart. Yet even in things difficult to discern, he proclaims here that the Lord will come and shine the light of His truth into the hearts of all mankind, at which point no man shall be praised, but all will only praise God.

Let us therefore take heed as to how, when, and with what spirit we judge. Jesus said to judge righteous judgment. We may judge actions, behaviors, words, and teachings against standards provided by God's word, that we may hold fast that which is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21). But we most often cannot judge motives, thoughts, nor intentions, as well as other hidden things. However, we can rest assured that the Lord knows and discerns the thoughts and intents of every heart, and will bring every work and secret thing into judgment.