

Don't Judge by Appearances

In **John 5:1-17**, Jesus healed an invalid on the Sabbath. He then told the healed man to take up his bed and walk. The Jews were incensed at the “work” this man did on that holy day. His only defense was, “I figured a man who had the power to heal me also had the authority to tell me to carry my bed on the Sabbath.” This one act must have really upset the Jews because two chapters later Jesus is still having to defend Himself about it. In **John 7:14-24**, Jesus recognized that their attacks were still about that healing. He explained how He inferred from Moses’ law that healing on the Sabbath was lawful. If they could circumcise a man on the Sabbath, He could heal a man. If they could remove part of the body, He could make the body whole.

However, the key I want us to note right now is how He finished His argument. In **John 7:24**, Jesus said, “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.” He was not talking about judging someone’s soul. He was talking about judging whether or not the action someone is taking is lawful and authorized.

First, we recognize that Jesus believed we need to make judgments of authority. He commanded that we judge, that is, that we discern whether or not something is lawful and authorized. He was not upset with the Jews for questioning authority. He was upset with them for not accepting right judgment about what was authorized.

Second, Jesus defined how we should judge. We must not simply judge by appearances. We need to judge with right judgment. That is, we should judge based on godly principles, based upon what is revealed in Scripture. And this is where we have the rub. How easy it is to judge simply by appearances. There are two sides to this.

On the one hand, there are some that judge actions as authorized because they appear good to them. I can’t help but think about the church’s work. Sadly, in modern times, people have diluted the work of the church to being a social welfare organization. The church’s job has become cleaning up water in third world countries, providing soup kitchens for the inner city poor, giving secular education to the underprivileged (or sometimes to the overprivileged willing to pay outrageous prices). Why do they do these things? Because they appear good. Who can deny that providing people with clean water, good food, and great education are good things? I certainly wouldn’t. The question, however, is if I judge with a right judgment do I see that is a good work for the local church to support? When I look in the Scripture, I see that the church’s job is to glorify God (**Ephesians 3:20-21**) and to uphold the truth so folks can be set free (**I Timothy 3:15; John 8:32**). Thus, these works appear good, but the Scripture does not justify them as good works for the church. In fact, when the church gets involved in them, the church gets distracted from its real mission of setting men free from sin.

On the other hand, there are some that judge actions as unlawful and unauthorized because they appear bad to them. I can’t help but think of the number of times I’ve heard actions condemned because they looked like something the denominations would do. I’ve heard having prayer groups condemned because that looks like the prayer partners of the Boston church. I’ve heard encouraging folks to find someone to confess to and pray with (cf. **James 5:16**) condemned for the same reason. I was once rebuked for having the congregation recite a psalm together despite Paul’s clear statement that we can speak to one another in psalms (**Ephesians 5:19**). The reason? It looked like something the Catholic church would do. Vacation Bible Schools have been rebuked because it reminded people of the denominations. On and on the illustrations could go.

Jesus said that we should judge with right judgment and not judge by appearances. If our only argument in favor of or against something is how it seems, how it appears, who else is doing it, then we are not judging with right judgment, but based on appearances. That will put us in sad company according to **John 7:21-24**.

Let’s quit basing our actions on what we think, feel, or like. Instead, let’s judge with the right judgment based on God’s revealed word.