

COLLEGE CHAPEL TALK

JUDGMENT

by the Rev. Walter Orthwein

Readings: Matthew 7:1-5; *Arcana Coelestia* 2284:3

The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church sheds a clear light on many difficult or ambiguous areas of life, and one of these is the matter of making judgments. For many people, the religious teaching about judgment begins and ends with the Lord's words when the woman taken in adultery was brought to Him: "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first" (John 8:7).

But is this all there is to say on the subject—that none of us is without sin, therefore we shouldn't judge anyone else? Clearly, there is more to it than this. We have to make judgments about people all the time. To take just one example: when parents hire a babysitter, is it not proper that they should make some judgment about that person's character before entrusting that person with their children?

This matter of judgment is one in which we find apparently contradictory teachings in the letter of the Word. In Matthew, the Lord says, "Judge not, that you be not judged" (7:1). But in John, He says, "Do not judge *according to appearance*, but judge with righteous judgment" (7:24).

There is no real contradiction; the Word is simply addressing different contexts and different kinds of judgments. The second statement, obviously, is an expansion of the general teaching given in the first statement. If we put the two statements together, then we get a fuller idea of the subject.

When the Lord says "judge not," the meaning is that we are not to judge falsely, or from a selfish motive, or based only on external appearances. We should not judge others from prejudice or self-interest or ill will. Instead of looking for the faults in others, we should concentrate on removing the evils and falsities from within ourselves. "First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matthew 7.5).

If we judge ourselves first, then we will be better able to judge others rightly. If we "remove the plank from our own eye"—if we get rid of the illusion of our own goodness, so that our minds are open to the genuine goodness and true light of heaven—*then* we will be able to discern people's real character. We will be able to "judge with righteous judgment."

But we cannot judge another's *spiritual* state; only the Lord knows what is in a person's heart. The rule the Heavenly Doctrine gives is "if you are inwardly such as you appear to be outwardly, then you are a good (or bad) person," and we will then act accordingly toward that person. We might or might not trust an individual, but we can never say whether that person is going to go to

heaven or not. For one thing, as long as people are living in this world, their ruling love, what they care about above everything else, is in the process of being formed.

But if we look upon others with a good will, wishing them well, and assuming the best about them, then it is only right and necessary that we should form some judgment about how they speak and act, and even about their moral character.

This “righteous judgment” will not be based on hearsay or appearances or slight evidence, and it will not go beyond what the circumstances require in the way of judgment. In other words, it won’t be a sweeping judgment, but will be limited to the specific occasion. If it’s someone you aren’t going to be having any further business with, then you don’t have to judge them. If it’s someone you are considering getting involved with in some way, then you only need to ask whether, in your judgment, this person is worthy of that particular involvement. You don’t need to make a general judgment about their whole character, except insofar as it would impact on the particular involvement you’re contemplating.

The most important judgment we are called upon to make is upon ourselves. And it is a judgment we really can’t avoid making. We make it continually, by what we do, and say, and choose to think about.

The Heavenly Doctrine explains that we are judged after death by how we have lived, because what we do represents what is in our will, the kind of love that rules there. The judgment is simply that we follow this love—either to heaven, or to hell. There is nothing arbitrary or legalistic about the final judgment we will face in the next world. In the end, we simply get to be ourselves—what we inwardly *are*. That is the judgment.

It is imperative, then, that we engage in an on-going process of self-judgment, in light of the Lord’s Word, throughout our lives. It is here in this world that our ruling love is formed, little by little, through the decisions we make each day. Judgment involves separating what is good from what is evil. In personal terms, we could say that judging ourselves means separating ourselves—that is, the good self which the Lord would give us—from evil.

In the deepest sense it is the Lord who judges us. It is the light of His truth which enables us to distinguish good from evil in ourselves, and the warmth of His love that gives us the strength to turn away from evil and choose the good.

When we pray that the Lord will forgive us our sins, we are really praying that He will judge us, because the word “forgive” in the original language means to “send away”—that is, to send away evil thoughts and affections, to separate and remove them.

In this respect, we can see that judgment and mercy are really one in the Lord. His judgments are not contrary to His mercy, but are an exercise of it. May we, also, in the judgments we make, remember the mercy He has shown toward us, and do likewise. Then we will “judge with righteous judgment.”

Amen.