

# One Christian's View on Judges and Judgment

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I am a Christian. I am a sinner. I am also a judge of 25 years who struggles to reconcile my job with biblical precepts regarding judgment.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”<sup>1</sup> In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul wrote: “[L]et us stop passing judgment on one another.”<sup>2</sup> These passages, and others, caution all Christians against becoming judgmental. Does that mean that society should rid itself of judges? From both a practical and biblical standpoint, my answer to that question is a resounding “No.”

### **I. Society’s Need for Judges**

A reality of human existence is that people sin. A reality of human interaction is that people will become involved in disputes. No human society will long survive without a methodology to address sins and disputes that negatively impact others. From a practical standpoint, societal self-preservation demands that individuals be appointed to resolve disputes and supervise the punishment of aberrant behavior. In the United States, our Constitution requires that these roles be performed by judges.

As a historical document, the Bible acknowledges the need for judges. In his first letter to Corinth, Paul responded to the inability of the Corinthian church to resolve disputes among its members.<sup>3</sup> In the Old Testament, Ezra was instructed to “appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people....”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Moses gave specific instructions to judges: “Hear the disputes between your people and judge fairly, whether the case is between

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1 *Matthew 7:1–2.*

2 *Romans 14:13.*

3 *1 Corinthians 6.*

4 *Ezra 7:25.*

two Israelites or between an Israelite and a foreigner residing among you. Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, two entire books of the Bible—Judges and Job—focus upon the tribulations and exploits of early Israelite judges.

Time and again, the Bible teaches that a societal hierarchy—we call this government—is required to avoid the perils of anarchy. The apostle Paul wrote: “the law is good if one uses it properly.”<sup>6</sup> Even in an era of despotic Roman rule, Paul instructed Christians to respect and obey governing authorities “for there is no authority except that which God has established.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, Paul referred to government officials as ones who “bear the sword” and who act as “God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.”<sup>8</sup>

Without question, judges are part of the “authorities” referenced by Paul in many of his epistles. By instructing Christians to obey those in authority, Paul is instructing Christians to adhere to judicial decisions. By implication, Paul recognizes that God has installed judges and imbued them with the authority to render human legal judgment. As to why judges are part of God’s plan, we need look no further than Paul’s letter to Timothy: “I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”<sup>9</sup> Judges maintain order so that godly people can worship and interact in peace.

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5 *Deuteronomy 1:16–17.*

6 *1 Timothy 1:8. See also Romans 7:7.*

7 *Romans 13:1. See also Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13–17; Hebrews 13:17.*

8 *Romans 13:4–5.*

9 *1 Timothy 2:1–2.*

## II. Human Need to Accept Judgment

Not everyone leaves the courtroom happy. However, for a society to avoid chaos, those who leave a courtroom must accept the outcome. Judicial decisions are not popularity contests; almost all represent the honest effort of judges to “get it right.”

Unfortunately, many today have begun to question the legitimacy of judicial decisions. In July of 2024, the Annenberg Public Policy Center associated with the University of Pennsylvania published a report entitled: “The Withering of Public Confidence in the Courts.”<sup>10</sup> According to this report, the percentage of Americans who express trust and confidence in the judiciary fell from 75% in 2002 to under 50% in 2022. A survey of 479 trial judges conducted by the National Judicial College in March of 2024 revealed that 90% believed that respect for judges has declined over the past 10 years.<sup>11</sup> This trend is alarming. If we are to remain a society where citizens can live in “peace and quietness,” trust in the judiciary must be maintained.

## III. Biblical Limits on Human Judgment

As a Christian, I am keenly aware of the biblical limits and instructions placed upon judges. These include:

- (1) Judges cannot judge a man’s soul: they are limited to assessing a man’s conduct. Only “God judges people’s secrets.”<sup>12</sup>
- (2) Judges should not be hypocrites. Paul wrote: “So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you

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10 Shawn Patterson Jr. et al., *The Withering of Public Confidence in the Courts*, 108 JUDICATURE 22 (2024).

11 Jenna Delacruz, *Nearly All Judges Believe the Public’s Respect For Judges Has Declined*, THE NATIONAL JUDICIAL COLLEGE (Mar. 5, 2024), <https://www.judges.org/news-and-info/nearly-all-judges-believe-the-publics-respect-for-judges-has-declined/>.

12 *Romans 2:16*.

will escape God's judgment?"<sup>13</sup>

- (3) Judges must work very hard to "get it right," because they are empowered by God "to punish those who do wrong and commend those who do right."<sup>14</sup>
- (4) Judges should not view themselves as superior to those who are being judged "for it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous."<sup>15</sup>

Does this mean that all judges must acknowledge the authority of the above Biblical precepts? No, it does not. I know quite a few excellent jurists who are not Christians, but who nevertheless adhere on a daily basis to the principles outlined above. They do so not because they have read or even believe in the authority of the Bible, but because they intuitively recognize the wisdom of the tenets expressed within.

Unlike many countries, America's system of justice is not governed by one religious belief-set. Judges swear an oath to the Constitution and not to a deity. That said, I believe that the more judges adhere to the guiding principles outlined above, the more that society—religious or not—will respect the judiciary and the decisions it renders.

#### **IV. Confidence and Humility**

Judges are a pretty confident lot. It takes confidence to render decisions that affect the lives of others. Without confidence, people become indecisive. Almost by definition, indecisive people do not make good judges.

There is a fine line between confidence and arrogance. While the former is a necessity for a judge, the latter can lead to decisions rendered based upon impulse and/or

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<sup>13</sup> *Romans 2:3.*

<sup>14</sup> *1 Peter 2:14.*

<sup>15</sup> *Romans 2:13.*

preconceived notions rather than thoughtful consideration.

I have always tried to maintain a level of confidence about my decisions and the process that led to them. I am, however, keenly aware that my confidence could be perceived as arrogance, especially by those whose thinking may not align with my own.

Is it possible for a judge to maintain confidence without being perceived as arrogant? I honestly do not know. As a Christian, I am aware of a Biblical preference for humility.<sup>16</sup> How can judges portray both confidence and humility? These are a few strategies I have seen:

- Acknowledge the reality that some decisions are agonizingly difficult. Let people see when their judge is struggling to weigh different and sometimes irreconcilable perspectives.
- Admit when you are wrong. Judges are human. All humans make mistakes. When a judge's own mistake becomes apparent to him/her, it should be openly acknowledged, and corrected when possible.
- Use self-deprecating humor. (I am not good at this, but I have seen other judges use this tactic effectively.)
- Listen. Even when what is being said is ridiculous. Even when the ultimate outcome is pretty apparent. It is the job of a judge to make sure that litigants feel that they have been heard.
- As the Apostle Paul instructed in his first letter to the Corinthians, always strive to maintain an "even-tempered" demeanor. This is not always as easy as it might sound, but it is important to avoid displays of

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<sup>16</sup> See *Proverbs 11:2* ("When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom."); *James 4:10* ("Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord..."); *1 Peter 5:5-6* ("[C]lothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.'").

emotion on the Bench.

- Treat people with respect. Even accused felons can be called “sir” and “ma’am”.

## **V. Conclusions**

What personal conclusions can I draw from all of the above? There are several: *First*, judges perform an essential function within any human society. *Second*, God understands and authorizes the existence of judges to resolve disputes and maintain societal peace. *Third*, judges who understand and accept their role and the limits of their role will not face God’s wrath merely by virtue of their occupation. *Fourth*, society will respect judicial decisions that are honestly rendered within the parameters of the Biblical precepts outlined above. *Fifth*, and perhaps most important, I pray the above are not rationalizations.