

Apparent Contradictions in Life

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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The Lord said,

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the same measure you use, it will be measured back to you.”
(Matthew 7:1)

But He also said,

“Do not judge according to the appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.”
(John 7:24)

So, which is it? Do we judge, or do we not judge? Like a lot of the apparent contradictions in the Lord’s Word, this is not just a theoretical or abstract issue; it really affects the way we live. And it illustrates the problem we have in trying to reconcile conflicts of interest or points of view on many situations that we face from day to day.

Fortunately in this first case the resolution is relatively simple: the word for “judge” in the first instance really means condemn. “Condemn not, that you be not condemned.” Yet we do have to make judgments, that is, decisions, about all sorts of things, including what we think and understand to be other people’s motives. Is this person angry? Is he likely to hurt me? Can I trust him? Why or why not? The point is not that we can ever determine his real, internal spiritual state; that is known to the Lord alone. But we can and must make a general assessment of his potential to DO good or evil *outwardly*, or we may not last long in this world.

To put this in a more positive context, the Gospels speak frequently about our duty to the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, prisoners, the lame, orphans and others with various afflictions, and the doctrines are clear that *this duty involves a caring and thoughtful discernment of what other people’s spiritual needs may be*. A “hungry” person is one who longs for goodness or love, a “thirsty” person someone who longs for the truth. A prisoner is someone constrained by falsities or lies, a person who needs the truth to make him free. A sick person is one who acknowledges that he is afflicted by evils and needs help. And so it goes. We cannot help these people unless we are willing and able to assess their needs – cautiously; always tentatively according to their own words and deeds, and with discretion, *but with zeal and conviction, too!*

Our theme today is the apparent contradictions we face in everyday life. Along with the issue of judgment versus non-judgment, we also have classic conflicts like that between patience and urgency, learning and doing, fighting and fleeing, even getting something done versus the process of doing it. Very often these conflicts can be linked to either a masculine or a feminine point of view, since we know, for example, that men tend to be more task oriented and women tend to be more focused on building rapport; also men as a rule are more cautious and women more open about showing their emotions. Another big one for most of us is the conflict between immediate gratification and delayed gratification (which is sometimes called “enlightened self-interest” because it may promise even more, long term). Still another is the simple act of prioritizing.

Let's take the example of learning vs. doing. At first blush there may not seem to be any contradiction here, but in fact we confront this issue almost every day. We want to get something done and we are inclined to rush off and do it without always taking the care we should to learn things that can help us do a better job. Young people often face this dilemma when they get tired of school. They just want to get a job and get on with LIFE and they don't care or don't realize how much more rewarding their lives could be with a more extended education. Then again, if they can't afford it, the conflict may be resolved for them.

This business of education also takes us back to the question of judgment. If we are too quick to judge, that is, to try to discern the truth of a situation without careful, patient analysis, without listening attentively to all the voices that may have useful input, we could make the wrong decision and really hurt someone. But then again, if we take too long the opportunity to make a difference may pass and we may live a long time with regret that we missed it.

Some things really are urgent, and can't wait. Someone is hurt and bleeding profusely. Unless you apply pressure to the right place and stop the bleeding immediately he may die. Someone is in the pool and hasn't come up for air in several minutes. This is no time for discussion and debate; somebody has to jump in the pool and get that person out.

In other situations people can be crippled by hasty action. Neck or back injuries, for example, require special care and expertise; if you were to move someone with such an injury in the wrong way he might end up a quadriplegic, so in that case it may be best to wait for trained experts to arrive at the scene. But note the word, may. This is what makes the whole problem so difficult, even at times excruciating: you don't know for sure whether you should move the person or not!

But now let's consider a different kind of problem. Suppose something you hold precious (whether material or spiritual) is threatened. Perhaps you see some negative consequence flowing from an action that affects you. One question, one conflict that might arise for you is whether to fight against this action, run away and avoid it, or accept it as necessary. Each of these responses may be valid in certain circumstances, but each is in some way contradictory to the others, so you can't do them all; you have to choose one. How do you do that?

As it happens the Word has a lot to say about this, and even though some of THAT may seem contradictory, too, it is possible to reconcile the differences in most cases by considering the context. For example, if you've done something wrong it may be necessary to take the consequences even if they hurt you in a major way. A failure to do so may lead to *undeserved* consequences for *others*, and besides, getting away with what you've done either reinforces your bad behavior or leaves you with some unresolved guilt. Remember how Achan's sin, taking some of the spoils from Jericho and hiding them, resulted in the deaths of some 36 others in the battle for Ai, or before that how the actions of 10 out of the 12 spies sent into the land of Canaan doomed the Israelites to 40 years' of wandering in the wilderness? There were many times in the Prophets where the Israelites were told to accept the domination of foreign powers as a consequence of their own evils, until they had learned their lesson and new leadership arose to restore them. All these events were of course symbolic, but they tell the truth about our need to take responsibility for our bad decisions.

Further, the Lord Himself said that we should not resist an evil person, the point being that evil

brings its own punishment and (a) there are times when we deserve it, but (b) even if not, it is better not to engage with the evil at all, lest we end up committing similar evils in response.

So if we can determine what is right and wrong in the first place, knowing the implications of our choice between them we might well take the advice – really the direct command of the heavenly doctrines – to simply shun, or flee away from the evil before we have a chance even to engage in it. The teaching is – and many old adages confirm – that evil really is contagious: “If you paint with tar some of it is bound to rub off.” So the best advice is to avoid it as much as possible.

But then there are those situations in which we have no choice but to fight back. We may fight to defend ourselves if we are innocent, but more importantly we may have to fight for innocence itself, either in societies, or states, or other institutions. Then, in that case, obviously prudence is required. As the Lord said, “What king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? – Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace” (Luke 14:31-32). Interestingly – and pointedly – this parable was offered in the context of the Lord’s command to forsake all and put our confidence in HIM. What’s the point?

Clearly the point is that He, and He alone, has the power to overcome the enemies of our spiritual life, and so if we try to fight without His support we will lose, whereas if we fight with His help, on the basis of the principles He teaches, we will win – spiritually even if not naturally.

Now the question is, how do we know for sure which of the conditions we have just outlined applies? How do we know whether we should give in, run away or fight back? Well, obviously, we have to know what the Lord teaches, we have to gather all the evidence we can about the people affecting us, and (hardest of all) we have to examine *ourselves* to see what *we* may have done to create or aggravate the problem. All these things are possible, and they are all challenging for us, but the biggest challenge of all isn’t knowing; it’s having the right attitude.

Sometimes we think that if we only knew – for sure – which course of action were right, our lives would be a whole lot easier. And they might be... except that in our present human condition the will and the understanding don’t necessarily work together! In fact quite often we DO know what we ought to do and we just don’t WANT to do it. We’d rather have it some other way. So we choose with some short term or selfish advantage in mind even though we know there is a wiser, better way.

The bottom line? – Most of the conflicts in our lives, most of the apparent contradictions, arise from the incongruence of our thought and will. THIS is what we need to work on, and THIS is the work of regeneration. The old will has to be replaced, and the new will is formed in accord with our actions based on the dictates of conscience, or a good understanding.

For example, let’s look at the potential conflict between building rapport and getting something done. Building rapport takes time as it involves working sensitively with people’s affections, whereas getting something done can often be accomplished relatively efficiently by force, or in any case with rewards and punishments. Which is better? Do we have to choose? Are the two dispositions mutually exclusive? In a crisis one may be better than the other, and may be neces-

sary, but in ordinary life and especially in spiritual life the ideal is that the two approaches comes together in a marriage not unlike the marriage of a man and a woman, each one informing and balancing the other, each one acknowledging the need for the other and not just appreciating it but honoring it and taking care to be solicitous about it.

Again, if men tend to be task oriented, and women relationship oriented, we ourselves as men and women should learn how to work together without one dominating over the other, or one believing and acting as if his or her approach were inherently better than the other. Men, we read, think from the intellect; women think from the will. But both the intellect and the will can be perverted; so one has no inherent right to rule over the other. Besides, men have an inner love that qualifies everything, and women an inner wisdom. So when all the intellect in the relationship is based on the truths of the Word and all the will flows from the Lord's love, then domination (active or passive) is the last thing on anybody's mind and a fully consultative, co-operative partnership is formed.

This is important. Thousands of years of Judeo-Christian tradition have men ruling over women. Even in some traditions of the New Church people have assumed that men should rule because our doctrine teaches that the understanding informs the will and keeps it under control. But that is assuming a regenerating man – and a woman who cannot be regenerated without Him, which is nonsense! Both men and women need the Lord for the equation to work, and if they have the Lord in their relationship they will work together, side by side, one providing more of *this*, the other more of *that*, this and that being more or less interior, especially moral and spiritual love and wisdom for the sake of heavenly life.

And so we come to the example of the conflict between immediate or worldly gratification and the kind of gratification we can experience in heaven. Very often these appear to be polar opposites, but they don't have to be. It's just that one functions on a lower level and one on a higher level of life. When in the Lord's prayer we say "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, *as in heaven so upon the earth*" we are acknowledging in a way that the kingdom of heaven is at least potentially *within* us. We don't have to abandon the one to inherit the other. But we DO have to keep them in order, which means that the things of this world are subordinated to the things of heaven – so much that we may "despise the one" if necessary in favor of the other. In other words, we *can* enjoy the blessings of heaven in this world; all we have to do is raise the level of our thought and affection so that we really are able to "look down on" the things of the world.

One last example of apparent conflicts – from our lessons: have you ever wondered what it might have been like to be the priest or the Levite passing by the injured man? Think about it. They were probably busy men, maybe even on their way to work. In any case we can assume they had commitments. How could they take time (and risk their own lives) to help this total stranger? We face this kind of thing all the time. Are we condemned if we do not help?

Well, maybe. But maybe not. The point of the parable is to illustrate the difference between caring and not caring, and the neighbor as defined there is *not the victim but the one who cared*, and thus in an abstract sense, *goodness itself*. So the question is, do we care about others, or do we really only care about ourselves? Every incident we face confronts us with this issue, whether it is an injured person by the road or an appeal from the church, whether it is the way we spend our time or the way we spend our money. And the Lord doesn't tell us what we have to do

exactly. He only asks us to care, to think about it, to discern and judge justly *for the greatest good*, thus to prioritize, to subordinate the loves of self and the world to more important, more rewarding heavenly things.

Can we do this? Yes, of course we can. Will we do it? The choice is ours.

Amen.

Lessons: 1 Samuel 13: selections about Saul's sacrifice
Children's Talk on Having Patience, Waiting for the Lord

Luke 10:25-37
NJHD #85-87

The third lesson:

“It is a common opinion at this day, that every man is equally the neighbor, and that benefits are to be conferred on everyone who needs assistance; but it is in the interest of Christian prudence to examine well the quality of a person's life, and to exercise charity to him accordingly. The man of the internal church exercises his charity with discrimination, consequently with intelligence; but the man of the external church, because he is not able thus to discern things, does it indiscriminately.

“The distinctions of neighbor, which the man of the church ought altogether to know, are according to the good which is with everyone; and because all good proceeds from the Lord, therefore the Lord is the neighbor in the highest sense and in a supereminent degree, and the origin is from Him. Hence it follows that so far as anyone has the Lord with himself, so far he is the neighbor; and because no one receives the Lord, that is, good from Him, in the same manner as another, therefore no one is the neighbor in the same manner as another. For all who are in the heavens, and all the good who are on the earths, differ in good; no two ever received a good that is altogether one and the same; it must be various, that each may subsist by itself. But all these varieties, thus all the distinctions of the neighbor, which are according to the reception of the Lord, that is, according to the reception of good from Him, can never be known by any man, nor indeed by any angel, except in general, thus their genera and species: neither does the Lord require any more of the man of the church, than to live according to what he knows.

“Because good varies with everyone, it therefore follows, that the quality of good determines in what degree and in what proportion anyone is the neighbor. That this is the case is plain from the Lord's parable concerning him that fell among robbers, whom, when half dead, the priest passed by, and also the Levite; but the Samaritan, after he had bound up his wounds, and poured in oil and wine, took him up on his own beast, and led him to an inn, and ordered that care should be taken of him. Because he exercised the good of charity, he is called the neighbor (Luke 10:29-37). Hence it may be known that they are the neighbor who are in good: the oil and wine which the Samaritan poured into the wounds, also signify good and its truth.”