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To Be or to Have Been: That Is the Question

We are expected to judge. We must. But we must *not* stereotype or label anyone.

Several years ago my wife and I were visiting Kronborg Castle in Helsingør, Denmark. This castle was made famous by William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. As we visited the castle, our minds flooded with scenes and dialogue from the play, especially Hamlet's famous inquiry, "To be, or not to be: that is the question."

But then I thought of a much more relevant question to ask ourselves: "To be or to *have been*: that is the question."

Allow Improvement

Unfortunately, we often use labels when speaking of others. For example, we might say things such as:

- "Elder Brown is a lazy missionary." Instead, we should say, "Elder Brown hasn't been working hard lately, but I believe he can improve."
- "Mary is not a religious person." In contrast, we could say, "Mary has not been interested in religion, but she might feel the Spirit if I bear my testimony to her."

When we say someone *is* something, we can end up labeling or stereotyping, judging without giving space for the possibility of change and improvement. But when we say *has been*, we indicate that we believe growth and progress are possible.

Is It Wrong to Judge?

Most Bible translations provide the following version of a teaching from the Savior: “Judge not, that ye be not judged” (Matthew 7:1). But the Joseph Smith Translation provides clarification: “Judge not *unrighteously* . . . , *but judge righteous judgment*” (in Matthew 7:1, footnote *a*; emphasis added).

It is indeed acceptable—and even expected—that we exercise judgment as we assess, evaluate, and discern situations and make decisions. And it is particularly important that we exercise righteous judgment as we interact with people.

For example, we should evaluate carefully whom we’re going to marry, use discernment to understand someone’s intentions, or assess one’s capabilities to fulfill a professional assignment.

We should always evaluate peoples’ actions or characteristics by the Lord’s standards, as contained in the holy scriptures and the words of the prophets. Above all, we should be sure that our judgments don’t attempt to unkindly define, quickly stereotype, or unjustly label anyone.

Able to Change

We exercise unrighteous judgment when we inaccurately portray others, particularly if by doing so we imply that they cannot change. In all of our interactions with others, we should remember that because of the Lord’s atoning

sacrifice, each of us has the capacity to improve. Consider these examples from the Savior:

- He said to the woman taken in adultery, “Go, and sin no more” (John 8:11).
- He told one of the men being crucified beside Him, “To day shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).
- As a resurrected being, He continued to see Peter’s potential and to mentor him, even though Peter had denied Him three times (see Matthew 26:34 and John 21:15–17).
- He told Saul, who had persecuted the Saints, to repent. Saul, who became Paul, obeyed and became righteous. (See Acts 9:3–6.)

The Lord Jesus Christ is a champion of second chances—and third and fourth chances too. He taught us to forgive “until seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:22). He is the only individual who lived a perfect life on this earth, but because of His life, His teachings, His atoning sacrifice, and His Resurrection, and through the ordinances of His gospel, we can also become perfect one day. Referring to our brothers and sisters in a way that conveys disbelief in their capacity to change would also convey disbelief in the power of the Savior and His Atonement.

Outward and Inward

It is a fact of life that we often judge (and are judged) by first appearances. We are in danger of judging unrighteously, however, when we judge based only on first appearances and fail to evaluate a person’s true character.

“The Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). Jesus referred to the hypocrites in His day as “whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of . . . all uncleanness” (Matthew 23:27).

The Savior was not teaching that a positive and decent outward appearance is not a good thing but that a man’s or woman’s inner character (moral and spiritual condition) is significantly more important. Think of our majestic temples: the grounds are beautiful, but much more important are the ordinances that are performed inside.

Missionaries too are required to maintain dress and grooming standards. By being clean, dressing modestly, and using proper language, they set a good example for those whose introduction to the gospel of Jesus Christ will come through what they see and hear from the missionaries.

Exercising Discernment

As we attempt to make righteous judgments, it’s important to

use discernment. The Guide to the Scriptures says discernment is “to understand or know something through the power of the Spirit. . . . It includes perceiving the true character of people and the source and meaning of spiritual manifestations” (“Discernment, Gift of,” scriptures.ChurchofJesusChrist.org).

Sometimes people who are evil inside use worldly appearance to try to trick us into thinking they are worthy of emulation. They are “wise in their own eyes and prudent in their own sight” (Isaiah 5:21; 2 Nephi 15:21). The Savior was able to see beyond this charade, and He was able to discern strength of character and honest intent of heart among even the most humble and downtrodden.

Alma exercised such discernment when he spoke to those who were “despised of all men because of their poverty” yet blessed because they had become humble and “lowly in heart” (see Alma 32:5–8).

We should remember that “the things of the Spirit of God . . . are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). When we see others as our Father in Heaven sees them, discernment allows us to exercise righteous judgment.

Righteous Judgment

Every day of our lives we judge by assessing, evaluating, and discerning. However, the Lord expects us to do it righteously. As disciples of the Lord

Jesus Christ, our words and actions should show that we are merciful, loving, and willing to help.

As righteous judges, we need to make sure we pay more attention to the character of a person rather than their appearance. At the same time, we should remember that every day we create first impressions by the way we look and the words we use. Most people will

be drawn to find out more about our character and the message of the gospel if our appearance reflects the high value of our message.

Our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, has shown us the perfect model to follow as we strive to judge righteously. We should—as He does—balance what we see on the surface with what goes on inside each person. ■

