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Appendix III: Saint Dorotheos of Gaza On Judging Others

Many Holy Fathers have taught that we are to judge no one, that as one draws closer to God in ascetic struggle, he will begin to see that he truly is “chief among sinners”—as Orthodox Christians pray before every partaking of Holy Communion—and that all others should be esteemed higher than himself.

With this in mind we offer for the reader's consideration these wise and instructive words of Saint Dorotheos of Gaza (sixth century):

Why are we so ready to judge our neighbor? Why are we so concerned about the burden of others? We have plenty to be concerned about, each one has his own debt and his own sins. It is for God alone to judge, to justify or to condemn. He knows the state of each one of us and our capacities, our deviations, and our gifts, our constitution and our preparedness, and it is for him to judge each of these things according to the knowledge that he alone has. For God judges the affairs of a bishop in one way and those of a prince in another. His judgment is for an abbot or for a disciple, he judges differently the senior and the neophyte, the sick man and the healthy man. Who could understand all these judgments except the one who has done everything, formed everything, knows everything? I remember once hearing the following story: a slave ship put in at a certain port where there lived a holy virgin who was in earnest about her spiritual life. When she learned about the arrival of the ship she was glad, for she wanted to buy a small serving maid for herself. She thought to herself, 'I will take her into my home and bring her up in my way of life so that she knows nothing of the evils of the world.' So she sent and enquired of the master of the ship and found that he had two small girls who he thought would suit her. Whereupon she gladly paid the price and took one of the children into her house. The ship's master went away. He had not gone very far when there met him the leader of a dancing troupe who saw the other small girl with him and wanted to buy her; the price was agreed and paid, and he took her away with him. Now take a look at God's mystery; see what his judgment was. Which of us could give any judgment about this case? The holy virgin took one of these little ones to bring her up in the fear of God, to instruct her in every good work, to teach her all that belongs to the monastic state and all the sweetness of holy commandments of God. The other unfortunate child was taken for the dancing troupe, to be trained in the works of the devil. What effect would teaching her this orgiastic dancing have, but the ruin of her soul? What can we have to say about this frightful judgment? Here were two little girls taken away from their parents by violence. Neither knew where they came from; one is found in the hands of God and the other falls into the hands of the devil. Is it possible to say that what God asks from the one he asks also from the other? Surely not! Suppose they both fell into fornication or some other deadly sin; is it possible that they both face

the same judgment or that their fall is the same? How does it appear to the mind of God when one learns about the Judgment and about the Kingdom of God day and night, while the other unfortunate knows nothing of it, never hears anything good but only the contrary, everything shameful, everything diabolical? How can he allow them to be examined by the same standard?¹⁷³

Some Saints even prayed for the conversion of the Devil himself and all his fallen angels! What unfathomable love has been shed abroad in the hearts of these ascetic-warriors! For those who have tasted of true humility born of prayer and spiritual struggle, the thought of passing eternal judgment upon others is abhorrent. God alone is the Righteous Judge of Mankind. Our speculation should cease with this affirmation. As Saint Macarius of Optina wrote in the nineteenth century:

As to those people who are good and kind but are not believers, we cannot and must not judge them. The ways of the Lord are inscrutable; let us leave these good people entirely to His judgment and to the grace of His Providence. He alone knows how and why He has built the argosy of humanity, and the small boat of each one of us, such as it is.¹⁷⁴

These wise words remind us of the Patristic dictum so eloquently set forth by Saint Gregory the Dialogist over fourteen hundred years ago: "Who is able to enter into the secret judgements of God? Wherefore those things which in divine examination we cannot comprehend, we ought rather to fear than curiously to discuss."¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Trans. Eric P. Wheeler, *Dorotheos of Gaza: Discourses and Sayings* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977), pp. 133-134.

¹⁷⁴ Trans. Iulia De Beausobre, *Russian Letters of Spiritual Direction: 1834-1860* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994). p. 54.

¹⁷⁵ Trans. P.W., ed. Edmund G. Gardner, *The Dialogues of St. Gregory the Great* (London: Philip Lee Warner, 1911), Book IV, Ch. 27, pp. 209-210.